六条

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑨

Rokujyou
When Hikaru was on the earth

野村美月
イラスト●竹岡美穂

ファミ通文庫

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〝六条〟 ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑨

野村美月

ファミ通文庫

野村美月

Mizuki Nomura

知る人ぞ知る合唱王国福島出身。幼い頃より「物語」を作るのが好きで、作家を目指す。『赤城山卓球場に歌声は響く』で第3回えんため大賞小説部門最優秀賞を受賞。趣味、朝寝、昼寝、夜寝、寝ること全般。主著に『卓球場シリーズ』『Bad! Daddy』『うさ恋。』『〝文学少女〟』などがある。

竹岡美穂

Miho Takeoka

7月1日生まれ。東京都出身、埼玉県在住の絵描き屋さん。お茶とウサギと古い博物図鑑、透明水彩と月光荘のスケッチブックをこよなく愛する。絵を描くか、何か創っていれば大いに幸せ。

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カバーイラスト　竹岡美穂

帆夏と葵の告白に返事ができないまま、夕雨と再会した是光。「わたし、笑い上戸になれた、かな？」朗らかな夕雨にドキドキしつつも、揺らぐ自分の心に戸惑うことに。そんな時、学園にまたもや不穏なメールが飛び交いはじめる。『ヒカルの君を巡る女たちは、赤城是光が虞美人の名のもとに断罪する』――。メールを気にするあまり、ぎくしゃくし、すれ違っていく是光たち。それを嗤うメールの送り主の、真の標的とは……!?　大人気学園ロマンス、第9巻!!

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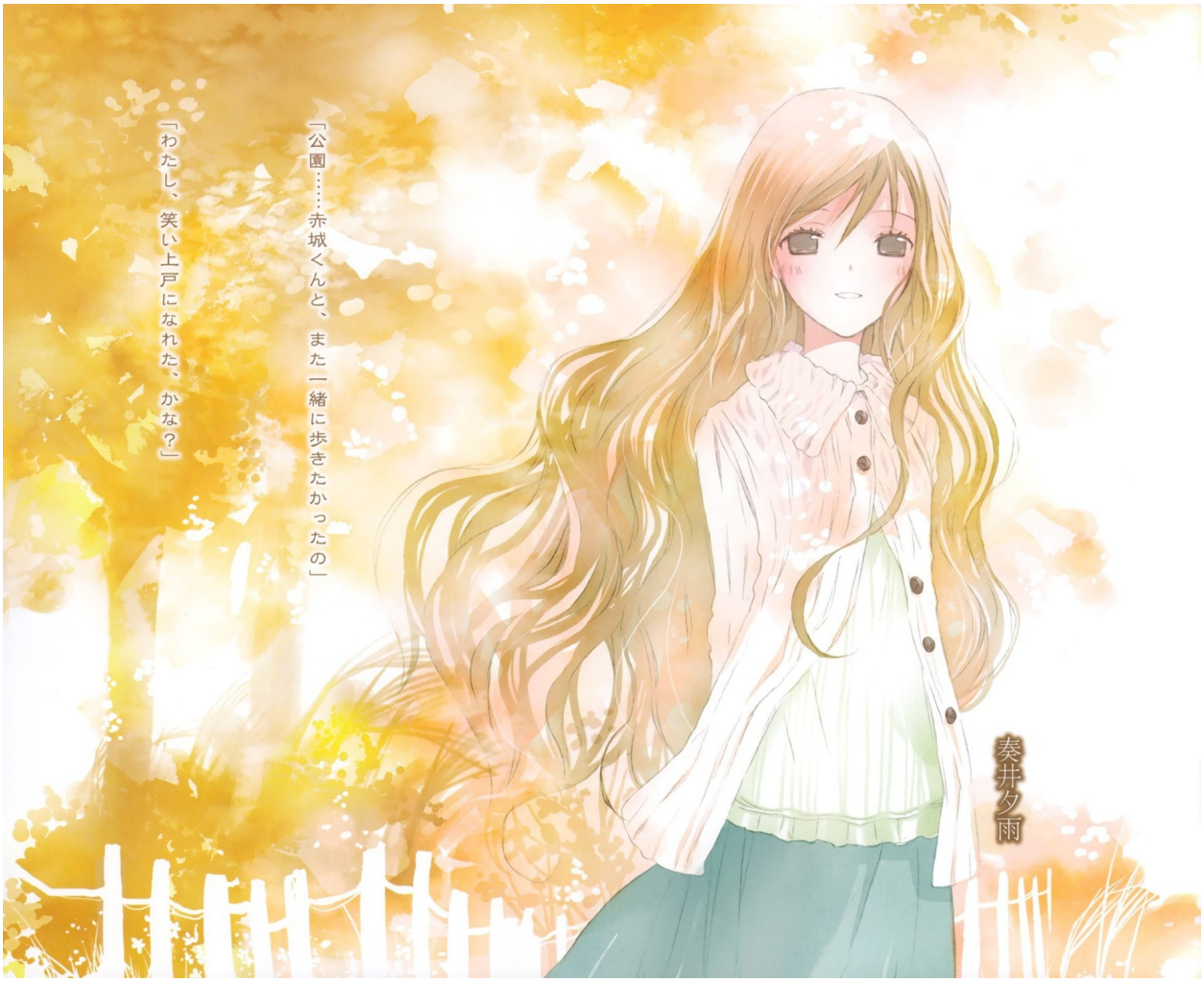
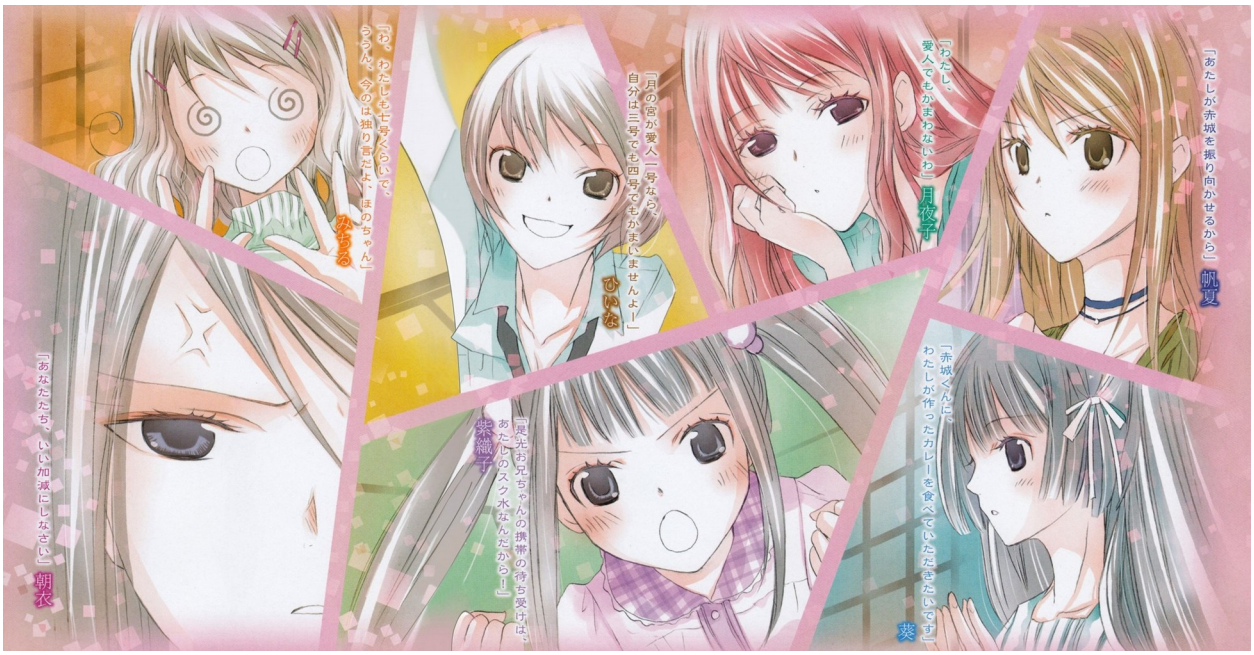

「公園……赤城くんと、また一緒に歩きたかったの」
「わたし、笑い上戸になれた、かな？」
奏井夕雨


「あたしが赤城を振り向かせるから」帆夏
「わたし、愛人でもかまわないわ」月夜子
「月の宮が愛人一号なら、自分は三号でも四号でもかまいませんよ！」ひいな
「赤城くんに、わたしが作ったカレーを食べていただきたいです」葵
「尾先お兄ちゃんの携帯の待ち受けは、あたしのスク水なんだから！」紫織子
「あなたたち、いい加減にしなさい」朝衣
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Prologue

Do you mind hearing a story of me when I was a child, Hikaru?
There was a party, and I got seperated from my mother because there were too many people, winding up in the garden.
I was never a child of outstanding looks and talents, and no matter how troubled I might had been, the adults would not be bothered with me. What they found interesting about me is the thing behind me, my heritage.
Tragically, I knew from young that I was not someone worth talking to without this name bestowed on me.
As I wandered around the garden under the moonlight, I found a shrine of stone amidst the lush, green shrubs.
It glittered silver under the faint moonlight, and a stretch of crimson flowers bloomed alluringly, beautifully in anonymity, swaying in the damp breeze caressing the skin. The petals were like quality silk, fleeting and thin, glistening as it absorbed the moonlight.
Through the tender skin, I could see the blood vessels. It was terrifying, yet at the same time, a captivating color.
There was a tinge of malice, lust engulfing the black iris amidst the petals.

—Snap me.

—Take me away.

I faintly heard a rich, sweet voice, and turned over to find a woman dressed in red there.
The crimson flowers swayed alluringly, and the long black hair danced in furor as the woman continued to speak with the sweet voice that lingered in my ears.

—I bestow the power of the spider upon you, the power of the one that obtains the one you love, the one that kills, and the one that possesses.

And then, Hikaru,
I became one with 'her' at that moment.

Chapter 1

Honoka said it.
There was no ambiguity and no hesitation as she said this to Koremitsu with an honest expression.
"I like you, Mr Akagi "
And Hikaru's fiancee, Aoi, too said that said with such fervor in her eyes.
The culture festival ended, and in the classroom where all his classmates had left, Koremitsu was cornered as he received the synchronic confessions of the girls.
And at that moment, the girl, his first love who departed to Australia, texted him,

“In a few days, I will be visiting Japan.”
And Koremitsu was completely stupefied as he looked down at the phone. His face, and even his hair remained still as he stood there, not twitching his head or fingers at all as his body was practically taken for granite.
Both Honoka and Aoi were staring intently at Koremitsu at this moment, causing his gut to wince. They were awaiting his reply.
This boy, dubbed a wild dog with savage eyes even till his high school days, was always shunned by everyone else, and notably, had no experiences of talking with girls.
Yet at this point, he got two confessions at once!
(What do I do at this moment!?)
This was the moment where he really needed the earnest advice of this friend of his who was so completely different, always receiving confessions from girls.
But no matter how Koremitsu tried to turn his head towards Hikaru, the latter was not betraying a hint in the slightest. This was the moment where this ghost friend drifting above his head would come in handy, yet Koremitsu could neither see his face nor hear his voice. One had to wonder what expression Hikaru was showing now that Koremitsu had confessions from two girls, one of them being Hikaru’s ex-fiancee
Having thought of this, Koremitsu wondered if it was a form of cruelty to ask Hikaru for help.
(But I can’t possibly settle this by myself!)
Sunset had already passed, and the outdoors was dyed ink as the second hand of the clock could be heard ticking in the classroom filled with suspense.
Cold sweat trickled down Koremitsu’s back as his gut winced, and his breathing got so heavy one had to wonder if he was being suffocated.
“I…”
Either way, as a man, he had to say something, and his dried lips hissed a suffocated bellow, causing both Honoka and Aoi to gasp.
The palm holding the cellphone was sweating away as he exerted more force into gripping it. Just as he was composing his words—
A young lady with long black hair tied in two tails suddenly barged into the classroom with tears in her eyes.
“Shiiko?”
Shioriko Wakagi, the non-blood related little sister living in Koremitsu’s home, quickly darted by Aoi and strode past Honoka, before staring at Koremitsu.
The latter inadvertently backpedalled, sensing that Shioriko was faulting him for being caught in this dilemma with two girls confessing to him in unison.
however, he saw the two trails of tears trickling down those rosy cheeks.
“Woah, wh-what now?”
“WAAAAHHHH!! BIG BROTHER KOREMITSUUU!!!”

She raised her voice, bawling away.
The situation seemed dire, and even Hikaru, who became one with the wind, leaned his body forward,
“What is the matter? Shiiko? What happened?”
In other words, this was not the usual crocodile tears.
“Sobs, he-he took it…”
She buried her petite face into his chest, whining away. At that moment, Koremitsu raised his eyebrows.
“What now? Hey, speak to me, Shiiko!”

And while Koremitsu was shouting in exasperation, the 3rd year Shungo Tōjō appeared. It seemed he was giving chase after Shioriko, and he yelled, panting furiously
“Wait!! I really do apologize for hurting your young heart, but it just happened to be an inevitable coincidence. No, looking at how I actually wanted to resist, this really is fate!”
Once he showed that hapless look on his face, he noticed the presences of Koremitsu and the others, “Uuh…!” and was left speechless at the classroom entrance, tensing up.
In response to Tōjō’s appearance, Aoi’s face paled as she gave him a chiding look,
“Big brother Shungo…what happened here? Did you…”
Honoka too raised her voice,
“Mr Tōjō, you robbed Shiiko of her—”
Shioriko herself got increasingly shrill in her wailing, lamenting hoarsely,
“B-big brother Koremitsu, he-he took tha-that precious thing of mine!!”
“That…I thought Mr Shungo would be someone serious and still a virgin into his 3rd year of high school.”
Sweat trickled down Hikaru’s face.
Basked in the condescending looks from Aoi and the others, Tōjō shook his head furiously, his eyes widened as he rambled.
“Th-that is not it! It is a misunderstanding! Surely I will not force an elementary schoolgirl. Well, she first sat on my lap. I-I’ll bear responsibility for this! I will not cause her any inconveniences in life, and I will make her happy—”
Tōjō bent forward as he approached everyone, and Koremitsu shielded an uneasy Shioriko behind him, saying,
“What the hell!! What did you do to my little sister!!!?”
He instinctively unleashed a clenched fist right at Tōjō’s face.
Bam! With such a sound, Tōjō, whose body was larger and taller than Koremitsu, was sent flying backwards, and Aoi and Honoka squealed.
His backside tumbling on the floor, Tōjō’s radiant black hair was ruffled.
“!! I do apologize for causing your little sister to cry! But I will not give up on this!”
“Shut up! I won’t hand Shiiko to you!”
“Please! Let me keep Lapis!”
“Huh?”
Koremitsu let out a skeptical voice, and Hikaru too muttered in surprise,
“Lapis…?”
Honoka and Aoi too looked at each other.
“Lapis, as in the cat Shiiko brought along for the fireworks?”
“The cat…?”
“Meow.”
A smart white cat elegant strode into the classroom as she let out a cool voice. She then jumped onto Tōjō’s knees, patting the front paws as she

practically dominated what appeared to be her resting place, curled her tail and closed her eyes.
(Why is Lapis in this school? Did Shiiko bring her along? Wait, Tōjō just talked about wanting Lapis handed to him. Does that mean that what Shiiko's robbed off…is Lapis!?)
While Koremitsu remained dumbfounded, Shioriko stood by the side, staring at Lapis furiously as the latter curled itself on Tōjō's lap, bawling,
"Lapis, you cheating heart!!!!"
◇ ◇ ◇
Several hours after the commotion,
Koremitsu was sitting cross-legged on the tatami in his room, frowning away.
Shioriko, having worn herself out bawling away, placed her little head on his thighs, her slender fingers gripping firmly at his pants, her closed eyes still seeping tears.
Masakaze and Koharu were extremely worried when they got home, wondering Shioriko, who went to the culture festival, was able to return home safely. Once they learned that Shioriko lied and went to the culture festival alone, they frowned, wanting to lecture her. However, they just let the matter slide after seeing her bawl so furiously.
Upon learning that Lapis was to be living with someone else, Masakaze glumly stated, "See? Women are creatures that just like to walk out like that.
Even cats apply too."
Tōjō cautiously held Lapis in his chest and brought her home, saying,
"I'll definitely make her happy. I'll report her situation to everyone and send photos of her here. You can come over to visit her however you want. Whenever you need her around, give me a call, and I will send her here."
He was forced into such a solemn, old-fashioned declaration, but was still unable to convince Shioriko, and the latter blurted with teary eyes.
"I hate you, I really do…you pimp."
Shioriko had strong feelings for Lapis. Having lost her only kin, her grandfather, when she first visited the Akagis, Shioriko was accompanied by the haughty Lapis sitting on her knees from time to time, licking Shioriko's hands and spending the time with her. She would not hand Lapis over and anyone else, even if it was Koremitsu.
But Lapis was originally a stray cat, and as Masakaze had said, it was not unexpected for her to vanish just like that. Koremitsu himself too had this premonition, and since Lapis decided not to leave Tōjō and elope with him, even Koremitsu had no say in stopping her.
The tears kept dripping down Shioriko's face once they got home, not drying up for a single moment.
"I don't care about Lapis anymore. I-I just need big brother Koremitsu now. I won't let Lapis in even if she does come back."

Shioriko kept the facade as she wept, and Koremitsu could only wipe off her tears with his fingers and a handkerchief.

“It really has been a tough day, Koremitsu.”
Shioriko shrank into a ball and closed her eyes, still snivelling away, and Hikaru muttered as he watched her with a melancholic, tender face.
“…Goodness gracious.”
Koremitsu glumly agreed as he wiped off the tears gathered by Shioriko’s eyes.
He assumed he could relax once the culture festival had ended, only to receive confessions from both Honoka and Aoi, and even Yū who was overseas sent a message stating that she would be returning…
“Now then, what do you intend to do, Koremitsu?”
“…”
Hikaru’s words again caused Koremitsu’s gut to sink, and the former again spoke with a serene tone,
“Whose words move your heart best, Miss Aoi, Miss Shikibu, or Yū?”
Koremitsu was inadvertently left speechless, gritting his teeth firmly. He then stuttered, uttering his true thoughts.
“—Well, I-I do find Aoi cute, and I think of Shikibu as a good woman. As for Yū, well, she’s my first love. I don’t know who to choose even if you ask me to choose now.”
“How about going out with all three? —I suppose that is impossible for you.”
With Koremitsu glaring at him, Hikaru could only raise his hands and sigh.
Of course, you harem prince of a ghost.
Koremitsu shrugged his shoulders as his head drooped. His mind was as erratic as one hunted down by savage-eyed mongrels. There was no way he could get an answer while being anxious, and his shoulders stiffened, his ears searing.
He continued to look down, letting out a despondent sigh.
“…Is it really okay for me to go meet Yū like this?”
One head to wonder when exactly was the ‘soon’ in Yū’s message. Would he be able to give an answer by then?
It was just a while back when Koremitsu showed weakness to Hikaru as he harbored gloom, saying that he wished to meet Yū again. Back then, his body was searing with the desire of wanting to meet Yū, who was far beyond the seas.
From the moment Yū sent the message “I hope to meet you again” however, Koremitsu was anxious as to whether he should be meeting her.
He was simply left in a panic after receiving confessions from girls, and could not comprehend his own feelings, let alone give a proper reply. Was it really okay for him to meet Yū in such a gaudy state?
“Argh, damn it, damn it…”
Koremitsu blushed as he muttered away, and Hikaru burst into giggles.
“Wh-what’s with you? What are you laughing at?”

He lifted his head in protest, and Hikaru narrowed his eyes, beaming,
“Sorry. I do find it somewhat refreshing to see you so frustrated and saying such dejected words, Koremitsu. It is amusing to see you, well, perhaps I can call this…a gap moe? Girls will be mesmerized seeing you like this. Ah, how cute you are.”
“To hell with that! You stupid ghost!”
But even though Koremitsu lashed out at Hikaru, his fury would not last for long.
Upon hearing Shioriko grumble in her nightmares while resting on his thighs, Koremitsu hurriedly hushed up, gritted his teeth, and lowered his eyes, muttering,
“I’ll be really troubled.”
Hikaru then descended in front of Koremitsu, staring at the latter as he beamed,
“Why yes, any bystander will be able to tell. As a friend,I shall impart this advise to you. Do not overcomplicate matters and go meet Yū. Perhaps you may be able to get an answer.”
The rich voice was filled with comfort and encouragement.
And just like his words,his expression was cheery.
“…O-okkayy.”
There was still doubt lingering in Koremitsu’s heart.
But with his friend’s words encouraging him, Koremitsu fished out the cellphone from his pocket, and with his clumsy fingers, tapped a reply to Yū,

“I’ll be waiting.”
◇ ◇ ◇
“So, you finally managed to tell Mr Akagi that you ‘like’ him, Hono? That’s really great!”
Once the culture festival celebratory event ended, Honok and Michiru bid farewell to the classmates who were going to party together again, instead arriving at a family restaurant.
Koremitsu could not attend the party.

—Eh, Akagi had to go home because of personal reasons.

Honoka played the message Koremitsu recorded on the cellphone.
“Sorry! I’m really grateful that you guys would invite me, really grateful! I just had something really important going on now!”
Shioriko’s wailing could be heard behind Koremitsu “Waahh!! You cheating heart! I hate you!”. The classmates were left dumbfounded, and they were muttering away.
“Eh, yeah…I guess it’s that kind of an urgent business.”
“I think it’s a little girl crying there. Is Mr Akagi a lolicon after all?”
“Eh? Akagi’s not going out with prez?”

“Yeah yeah. I heard that they held hands and went out for a date or something.”
“I heard that she fed Akagi some takoyaki.”
Michiru smiled as she responded to the classmates’ words.
“That’s not it. Mr Akagi’s very kind. He just wanted to accompany me back then.”
Again, she showed Honoka a smile, indicating to the latter not to mind about it.
“Well, for me, I always wanted you to convey your true thoughts, Hono. Thanks to Mr Akagi, I was able to bid farewell to the person I like.”
Michiru’s voice came from the other end of the table, her eyes filled with grit and composure. She was a lot more matured, a stark contrast to back then when she would act flustered whenever the two girls were alone.
Michiru stated that she liked the Hikaru Mikado who fell into the river during Golden Week, and that she merely transferred the feelings onto Koremitsu.
Thus, Honoka she did not to be worried about her.
Koremitsu and Hikaru were so different in personalities, so Honoka could not understand what Michiru for merely treating Koremitsu as Hikaru’s replacement.
But the matter was that Michiru was able to convey to Honoka how Michiru was really grateful to Koremitsu, and how she was able to mature due to his actions.
“It’s because of me that you weren’t able to speak to Mr Akagi, Hono. it may be shameless of me to say this now, but I really wish that you can patch things up with me. I do think that Mr Akagi really does like you. When both of you weren’t talking to each other, Mr Akagi was still worried about you.”
Touched by Michiru’s revelation of the truth, Honoka returned a smile, saying,
“Thanks, I’ll try my best.”
But once she recalled the frozen face and anguished expression Koremitsu showed during the confession, her heart just winced.
(Akagi…seems worried about how he’s going to reply Her Highness Aoi and me. From whom did the message come from anyway?)
His shoulders simply jerked the moment he saw who sent the message, and he was staring at the phone.
The bitterness could be clearly seen from those eyes—
(I like Akagi. I won’t try to hide these feelings again, and I won’t try to fool myself again. If my love for him is causing him pain however, what do I do?)
There was a lingering ache in her heart.
(And if Akagi chooses Her Highness Aoi…)
Just thinking about it was enough to cause pain and searing heat deep within Honoka’s head, her heart wincing in agony. Suddenly, her phone buzzed.
It was an anonymous message.

(Another of those again?)
Honoka frowned, wanting to delete the message, but once she saw the title, her face froze.
(This is…)
♢ ♢ ♢
At this moment, Aoi too was embracing her beloved cat, Shell Blue, immersed in her memories as she laid on the bed.
She vented her frustrations on Shungo, who sent her home,
“Big Brother Shungo, are you more concerned about Lapis than me?”
Shungo stared at the white cat with lapis colored eyes, which Koremitsu passed on to,
“O-of course that is not something that can be compared…! You are still my precious little sister, but I managed to get Lapis after begging, so I have a responsibility to take care of her! I hope that you will allow me to research on making a healthy menu for Lapis while I make some of your favorite Souffles.”
He frantically excused himself,
“It does not matter. I prefer Shell Blue over you, Big Brother Shungo.”
And with that cold retort from Aoi, his shoulders were slumped dejectedly as he returned home.
Aoi regretted venting her erratic rage at Shungo, and even though she did so, it did not eliminate any uneasiness in her heart.
“I-I said it.”
She buried her face in the belly of her black and white pet cat, murmuring nervously.
Once Aoi spotted Honoka confessing to Koremitsu in their classroom after the culture festival, she was unable to hold in her feelings, blurting out, “I too like Mr Akagi!”
(I did such a shameless thing…because I did not want to lose to Miss Shikibu…)
But those were Aoi’s true intentions, and she would not regret saying it out.
She would act aloof when she was in love with Hikaru, and would ignore Hikaru whenever he was out flirting with other girls.
She would lie to herself, thinking that she never intended to her Hikaru’s wife, that she did not mind about whoever Hikaru went out with, and that she really hated Hikaru for being so unfaithful.
(I can no longer lie about my true feelings like how I was back then…) With a rival present, it meant that she had to declare war, to go for a straight fight, to grab the heart of the boy she liked.
Miss Aoi—her heart was practically winced in agony upon recalling that beautiful call and the dazzling smile, and she felt like bursting into tears.
Her feelings for Hikaru would probably never ever change in her life.
But even so, Aoi still fell in love with Koremitsu, and to Hikaru, perhaps she herself was someone unfaithful herself.

(I suppose Mr Akagi may not like me as a lover as I was once Hikaru's fiancee.)
But even so, Aoi decided to work hard.
Due to the tight embrace, Shell Blue let out an uncomfortable protest.
"Sorry."
Aoi apologized as she eased the strength in her arms, and Shell Blue immediately landed on the bed, snorting with uppity.
At that moment, the cellphone placed on the side table with the cat paw design let out a calming melody.
"…Who is it?"
She opened the anonymous message that was sent, and gasped.
◇ ◇ ◇
That day, as the crimson flowers swayed, I met that red-clothed woman in front of the temple.
Once I got home, I had a fever that would not subside for another 3 days, and I was bedridden.
In my dreams, that woman was dressed in a Jūnihitoe, smiling. The bewitching, erotic crimson flowers surrounding her kept swaying, and her hair slowly reached towards me, entangling my body, trying to pull me over.
The crimson flowers were all aimed at me, and the black iris in the middle of those thin petals wanted to devoured me.
I pleaded for my mother to save me, but she remained unmoved, giving me a terrifying glare.
With a heinous face, she said to me with bloodshot eyes.
"Your father has another woman other than your mother, and even let that wretch of a woman bear a child."
Yes, I have to pass judgement on those wretched women.
My finger proceeded to press the send button.
◇ ◇ ◇
The day following the culture festival was a holiday.
Shioriko kept clinging at Koremitsu since morning, not willing to move even a step away from Koremitsu as she brushed her teeth and washed her face beside him. Even when eating, she was clinging to Koremitsu's side at the Chabudai as she had egg over her rice, miso soup of seaweed and stock, and broccoli salad.
And she kept clinging at Koremitsu's shirt even though it was time for elementary school students to go to school.
"I suppose the incident with Lapis caused quite some shock. I do find that Shiiko has been looking cheerful recently, but there are times where she looked forlorn. Those were the times when Lapis was comforting her."
Hikaru muttered.
"Guess I got no choice."
And so, Koremitsu found himself sending Shioriko over to her elementary school.

“Sobs. You have to sleep together with Shiiko today and tomorrow, and go to school together, and play together after school. You have to be with Shiiko all 24 hours.”
With the stares of the elementary students and staff headed to school upon them, Shioriko wept as she pleaded in front of the school gate, and Koremitsu was left speechless.
“Well, that’s…”
Shioriko’s black hollow eyes immediately dampened, and the tears welled in her eyes.
“How pitiful Shiiko is. She is being so insecure here? Go hug her, Koremitsu.”
(You think I can do that now!? Those teachers have been holding their cellphones and staring at us now. They’ll probably be calling the police if I do such a thing now, and the cops will be coming after me here!!)
“Well, I won’t disappear. Didn’t I promise you that I’ll continue to take care of you until you become an adult?”
“But that kind of thing isn’t certain here~~!”
Tears continued to flow down Shioriko’s cheeks.
“Hey, enough, stop crying now. Everyone’s looking at you. I can’t be with you if I’m taken away by the cops. Now, blow your nose.”
He clumsily coaxed Shioriko as he brought a piece of tissue paper to her face, and finally managed to send her into through the school gate.
Shioriko turned her head back many times, before finally disappearing past the staircase.
After seeing this, Koremitsu let out a deep sigh,
(Don’t tell me this is going to continue on every morning for some time now.)
◇ ◇ ◇
“Uu, big brother Koremitsu…”
It was less than a minute after their farewell that Shioriko felt forlorn, wanting to head back to Koremitsu.
She wanted to act more mature than girls of her age, but Lapis, whom she had such deep feelings for, went over to that disgusting, brooding, uppity man, and this caused her to lose the pillar of support in her heart.
No matter what she saw or heard, her thoughts always deviated to the most pessimistic possible, and tears dripped out of her eyes.
“I’m really a strong girl…”
She was adept at making crocodile tears, but she was still displeased and embarrassed to be crying for real.
While Shioriko was about to wipe the tears of her face with her hand, The cellphone dangling by the grassy green Pochette at the side vibrated.
(Maybe it’s from Big Brother Koremitsu.)
She quickly fished her phone out, and opened the message.
The sender was not Koremitsu, but the content of the message sent clearly mentioned Koremitsu’s name.

And Shioriko showed a heinous stare unbefitting of a child as she stared at the phone, the other empty hand grabbing firmly at the hem of the miniskirt…

◇

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“I do suggest that you send Shiiko a message. this might be the moment when she is really wishing to go home.”

Hikaru spoke to Koremitsu from diagonally above. For some reason, he was dressed in black, tight-fitting pants and a short mantle, the outfit of a matador.

At this moment, Koremitsu was not really in the mood to look over at Hikaru.

“Is that so…”

Saying that, he fished out the cellphone from his pocket.

“No, if I send the message now, it’ll make her more depressed, won’t it. It’s also important for me to let things be and watch from afar.”

And he slipped it back.

“Do not say that now. Shiiko may be crying now. No, surely she is. She is feisty, but she really is a forlorn one.”

“No, you’re just doting on her too much. I’m more of the Spartan type.”

“You may say so, but who is the one more flustered than I am whenever Shiiko breaks into tears before you?”

“Ack. T-that’s.”

How’s that possible? While Koremitsu wanted to deny this decisively, the cellphone in his pocket rang.

“It is definitely Shiiko.”

Hikaru confidently noted.

“Listen up, I’m not going to be so overly doting on her.”

Yes. No matter how much Shioriko wailed and wanted to return home early, wanting him to pick her up, it was his responsibility as an older brother to teach her to hang on until the very end.

However, the sender of the message was anonymous.

“Doesn’t look like it’s Shiiko.”

“Eh?”

How strange. I never made a mistake as to when a girl would make a call. Hikaru said, floating in the air with the matador cape flowing.

“Have your instincts dulled or something, you harem prince?”

Koremitsu let out some spiteful words as he opened the message.

“Ack.”

And at the next moment, he took back what he said.

Hikaru, peeking at the phone, too exclaimed in surprise *“Wah!”*

“I see. This really is something way beyond my expectations.”

The message was from Yū, and written on it was ‘I am sending this message from the phone’.

In other words, she would be arriving at the airport in a few hours.

He received the message from Yū stating that she would be returning to Japan, but this was too quick.
He was yet to be mentally prepared!
“Hey, can you send a message in a plane? Is someone pretending to be Yū fooling me here?”
While Koremitsu raised his eyebrows, Hikaru calmly stated,
“I do suppose foreign flight companies do provide such services. Either that, or it is a private jet.”
“But there’s no way it’s a private jet, right? Seriously, is this message really from Yū? Is she really flying back to Japan?”
Koremitsu’s heart suddenly raced, the blood surging in his mind, and his legs got wobbly as he did a funny dance on the road.
“Koremitsu, calm down! We agreed that you are going to find Yū and confirm your feelings!”
“Y-yeah.”
Yes, he did reply to Yū **“I’ll be waiting.”**
He wanted to meet Yū, and he would get it.
His ears could practically hear the tender drizzle, and the frail girl with that fleeting smile ostensibly in front of him. His heart was griped.
After confirming the time, Koremitsu went off to the airport.

The estimated arrival of the flight mentioned in the message was just before noon.
It was the first time Koremitsu entered the airport, but with Hikaru dressed in a uniform (?) leading the way, he arrived at the gate she was supposed to pass through, and waited.
There were businessmen dressed in suits, flocks of madams gossiping away furiously, and foreign tourists of all kinds of eye and hair colors.
Groups of people passed by, and Koremitsu frantically searched through the crowd. The throbbing of his heart was as fast as that of a second hand.
Where?
Where is Yū?
When will she come by? Is she yet here?
There was some anxiety brewing deep within his heart, but once Koremitsu made the decision to meet her, he had an unbridled impulse to meet her.
This emotion got more agitated, practically about to explode from deep within him.
Floating in the air, Hikaru’s eyes suddenly dazzled.
Koremitsu too saw her!
He spotted a serene girl with wavy, flowing hair, dressed in a prim skirt that reached her knees, walking through the wave of people.
It seemed she too was looking for Koremitsu, her petite head shaking left and right like a tweety.
Soon after, she noticed Koremitsu, and the faint coral lips bloomed slightly, her face showing her hearty smile.

Ahh, Yū had become cheerful!
That smile was blooming with all its might, causing Koremitsu's heart to race, his heart to sear.
Lost in his emotions, Koremitsu ran towards Yū.
And Yū too beamed as she ran towards him.
"Mr Akagi…"
Her face beaming, her hair bouncing, warm tears welled in her eyes as she stared at Koremitsu.
It had been a few months since he last saw Yū, and she became so cheerful, so dazzling, that Koremitsu inadvertently looked away, not ready to look at her directly.
"What's the matter…?"
Yū worriedly inquired.
The soft voice was exactly the same as the one on that day of farewell, and Koremitsu's heart trembled.
"My heart…just feels like exploding whenever I look at you directly…"
He felt the temples steaming away, and he stammered.
Upon saying that, a pair of white, pure hands reached over to him, gently sticking at Koremitsu's cheeks.
Ostensibly absorbing the excessive heat Koremitsu had were the cooling, soothing hands.
And while Koremitsu was taken aback,
"Please look at me…"
Yū whispered shyly.
Koremitsu shyly turned his face to her, and saw her blushing face and moist eyes staring right at him.
Once their eyes met, they got more flustered.
And both of them remained still as they stared at each other with flushed faces.
"We-welcome back."
Koremitsu realized that he had yet to say those words, and suddenly chimed in.
"I'm…back."

Yū too answered with a voice of bashfulness and contentment.
“Want to get something to eat…?”
“Yes…”

They ordered some snack at the airport cafe, and Yū informed Koremitsu of the reason why she returned to Japan.
“I did some volunteer work at Australia…helping out at the Nursing Home, chatting with the elderly.”
Yū did her best too while attending school at the same time.
It was a tough, busy stretch for her, but there was always something worth reminiscing over every day, which helped alleviate her loneliness.
She met an old man over there who had a son, and the latter was married in Japan, bearing a child, and lived a family life. His son, now a father however, had disputes with the old man himself, and the man himself left Japan, so much that they never met each other.
That son would put a photo of his family every year in a Christmas postcard and send it to the old man, but the latter just would not give any proper thanks because of how stubborn he was.
“The old man got sick…and the doctor gave a diagnosis saying that he doesn’t have much longer to live…so he pleaded me to meet that son of his before he died, and say a few words.”
But that old man continued to pout even at that state, saying “I don’t want to go to Japan where I can’t understand what they’re saying.”
At that moment, an acquaintance visiting the old man said.
“In that case, how about having Yū accompany you back to Japan? She can head back to Japan herself; she knows the language and geography there, and with her around, you have reason to go to Japan, no?”
The old man, intending to visit his son and grandson himself, grudgingly agreed
“If Yū is willing to go with me.”
That old man’s acquaintance heard of this, and immediately pleaded Yū,
“Please Yū. You will have to take a few days of vacation, but just leave the hospital and accommodations in Japan to me.”
“If…I can come along.”
Yū herself agreed.
“I want the old man to visit his grandson…and I wanted to visit you, Mr Akagi.”
Yū even whispered, mentioning that she intended to craft a personality that could be confident enough not to visit Koremitsu by herself.
Whenever Yū stared at Koremitsu with her clear eyes, the latter felt suffocated.
“So the one who arranged to send you back is…?”
Koremitsu asked, and Yū politely curled her lips, smiling,
“Well…it’s still a secret. I’ll definitely introduce him to you though. He is a nice person, surely you’ll be surprised to meet him…”

(Who’s that person I’ll be really surprised by?)
Koremitsu did not really know who that person was, but after seeing how confident Yū was in him, Koremitsu too believed he was a good man.
He never noticed Hikaru around, and perhaps the latter was trying not to appear in front of him for his sake.
Koremitsu however believed that Hikaru was definitely watching from somewhere, and his ears began to sizzle as he thought about what expression Hikaru would be showing as he watched over them.
(It’s great that Yū’s doing her best out there…)
She became more empathetic towards others, wanting to help them. This was something she would not have done when she went through the phase of
rejecting the outside world, shutting the windows and locking the outside windows, and was an improvement he never thought of.
(It’s the right decision to let Yū be with her mom.)
Koremitsu was delighted about Yū’s change, and his thinking changed as a result.
After their meal, Koremitsu asked Yū where she wished to visit.
Yū’s expression however looked dreamy as she answered,
“I do wish…to walk in the park with you, Mr Akagi.”

Koremitsu inadvertently recalled that raining day, when the duo, soaked thoroughly, held hands in the park.
The park in that memory welcomed the end of Autumn.
The frosty, transparent daylight shone upon the entire park. The innocent children were playing at the sand pit, and an elderly couple were seated on the bench, basked in the sunlight.
The duo walked side by side under the dazzling daylight, and on a closer look, Koremitsu’s hand touched Yū’s pure white hand, their fingers intertwined.
Koremitsu was holding Yū’s hand bashfully.
And Yū too held his hand demurely.
Unlike their clasped hands from back then, it seemed they were a little more courteous with each other’s feelings according to how they held hands.
But even so, the tenderness of Yū’s hand in Koremitsu’s crude, massive one caused the latter’s heart to practically explode.
The flower beds in the garden consisted of orange Marigolds, and yellow and purple Pansies, while the Silver Grass at the lakeside swayed along with the breeze.
One could see a few fiery red fruits on the chunky, wide branches of the Firethorn, and there were round yellow fruits the size of 2 tennis balls on the branches off the Quince dangling.
The firm green stems and the bright yellow Farfugium decorated the floor, and the plain-looking white and pink Chrysanthemum Japonense bloomed

healthily,
“These are the Gomphrena. The ones over there with some spots are the Taiwanese Tricyrtis…the one that looks like a little tree and has Ametrine-like fruits are the Winter Cherry…”
In Hikaru’s stead, Koremitsu informed Yū of what he was told.
They trolled through the path formed by yellow, wilted leaves, and there were occasionally the rustling of some brown leaves under their footwear.
“The garden during the beginning of summer…that rainy day, it was really pretty…but the garden in the clear autumn isn’t bad either…”
Yū, beside Koremitsu, blissfully whispered.
“Ah, yeah.”
And Koremitsu’s ears itched, his gaudy response extremely poignant.
They spotted a bush of indigo flowers as tall as a human, and Yū’s eyes dazzled.
“That’s the Hummingbird Sage.”
Koremitsu too had an impression of that flower. It was the same flower he saw with Yū on that rainy day.
“It bloomed again…”
Yū cheerfully whispered, and Koremitsu’s heart again got really hot.
It was unfathomable, when they separated, that he would ever be able to see the flower they saw together in early Summer, with Yū again under this Autumn sun.
At that moment, Koremitsu wanted to send the uneasy, forlorn Yū with a smile, but his cheeks kept cramping, and he was unable to smile. The most he could do was to tell her that he would be flying straight to her if she told him something had happened.
But even so, a teary Yū gave Koremitsu a smile back then. At this moment, she smiled, giggling,
“Mr Akagi, the white flower that resembles a spring onion must be the Japanese Onion. You can soak its root in vinegar to make an onion-like taste, you know?”
Due to the impoverished life she lived through, what she said was exceptionally poignant.
(She really became a bubbly girl…Yū’s actually able to laugh like this…)

—When we meet the next time, I’ll show that I’ve become a girl who likes to smile.

Koremitsu recalled the words Yū declared back during their separation, and his heart inadvertently jolted. Suddenly, Yū began to cough.
“Hey, you alright?”
Yū herself continued to cough,
“I’ll go buy some drinks—”
While Koremitsu was intending to run off, Yū pulled Koremitsu by the hand, shaking her head as she said,

“I’m…fine here. It’s just difficult for me to keep laughing.”
She confessed with her cheeks blushing.
(Ack. Was that a pretentious laugh?)
Koremitsu himself felt guilty, but even so, his heartache became honey.
“You don’t have to force yourself to laugh.”
Yū lifted her head at Koremitsu, whispering,
“But Mr Akagi, your girlfriend…is someone who likes to laugh, no?”
Koremitsu’s heart again shrieked in a jolt.

“Have I become someone who likes to smile?”

Yū stared at Koremitsu intently.
Her clear eyes were brimming with passion.
That was the expression she gave Koremitsu in the rain, before they kissed.
Her eyes were practically luring him over.
Koremitsu’s head was sizzling away once he realized she was yearning for a kiss.
His consciousness were focusing on Yū’s lips. The faint, coral-colored lips were fleeting and tender, and the impulse to touch them again and kiss her surged within him.
The area under Yū’s face too was dyed red.
Was it alright for him to kiss her?
But he still had his replies to Honoka and Aoi. Furthermore, that Hikaru was definitely watching him from somewhere.
He was lost in ecstasy when he kissed Yū back then, to a point of forgetting Hikaru’s existence. After recalling the past, Koremitsu had an image of Hikaru gleefully watching them, leery and lucidly lewd, nodding away in approval from time to time right in front of him.
Koremitsu stopped himself just as he approached Yū as he sensed the stare from the side, and the children playing in the sand pit were squatted by the side, looking up at them.
“!”
“!”
Koremitsu and Yū hurriedly turned their heads aside.
The mothers hurriedly ran over, apologizing profusely as they dragged their children by the arms, leaving the scene.
But neither Koremitsu nor Yū had any intention of looking at each other anymore.
“Ah, too bad. You could have kissed despite all that had happened.”
Hikaru, who had been posing as a bystander, leisurely floated in front of Koremitsu as he lamented.
(You’re annoying. Shut up.)
Koremitsu thought as he glared back.
But what could he do after all this? It was too awkward.
“Anyway, perhaps you will be able to find something new to talk about?

Anything Yū may be interested in?”
Hikaru chuckled as he watched Koremitsu being caught in a pinch, advising him.
(Anything Yū may be interested in? Sea? Rock sugar? No, those are too sudden.”
“Then perhaps you can talk about something both you and Yū have in common.”
“Y-yeah! Are you left, Lapis came over to our house—!”
Koremitsu blurted out whatever came out in his mind, and Yū quickly turned over to him, leaning over.
“Lapis is at your house, Mr Akagi? I really want to meet her?”
(Ack, Lapis is at Tōjō’s place.)
Koremitsu panicked.
“Ah, well, she was still napping at my corridor just a while back. I’m not lying, but now…it’s, a little inconvenient to find her.”
“Did something happen to Lapis? Was there an accident…Lapis is a little hard of hearing?”
“Th-that’s not it! Lapis’ very healthy now…eh, wait.”
After pulling some distance from Yū, Koremitsu pulled the cellphone out from his pocket, and dialled the number Tōjō gave him the previous day.
“Ah, it’s about Lapis. Can I go over to your house? No, wait, you mind bringing Lapis over to my house? Please?”

And so, the situation ended up with him going home together with Yū.
“It really is fiery of you to bring your girlfriend home and introduce her to your family on the day of your reunion.”
(Like hell it is.)
And Koremitsu retorted back at Hikaru, floating above him.
“Shall I bring a gift for your family, Mr Akagi…am I…able to greet them well…?”
While Yū mentioned that with apprehension,
“I don’t have any rich family members here, and well, those guys are as savage looking at me. They won’t eat you up though, so you don’t have to be scared.”
He said as they walked back.
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Clearly, Koremitsu felt that he made a mistake once he saw the many ladies shoes lying on the entranceway.
(These…aren’t Koharu’s shoes, right? Shiiko’s friends? No, they aren’t of kid sizes…)

“Welcome back, big brother.”
Shioriko came out to greet him, clearly feeling unhappy.
“We-Welcome back, Akagi.”

“Erm…sorry to intrude, Mr. Akagi.”
“I just happened to pass by because of student council matters.”
“Can I have an interview with you, Mr. Akagi?”
“Sorry, sorry! Hono’s too embarrassed to come here alone.”
One after another, the girls appeared at the Akagis’ entranceway. There was the blushing Honoka, a hesitant looking Aoi, cold looking Asai, Hiina poking her body forward excited, and Michiru apologizing profusely.
“Wow! Everyone’s present.”
Hikaru marvelled as he floated above.
“Ah, there’s still Tsuyako left.”
If that glamorous looking upperclassman is to appear here, how am I going to last!?
The moment Koremitsu thought of that however, a beauty with bright red long hair poked her head out from behind him.
“Good afternoon everyone. Oh, you actually came by, Miss Asai.”
Koremitsu was practically living a nightmare.
(This is impossible.)
Koremitsu glanced aside, and found that Yū had her eyes widened. It seemed she was wondering if those girls were the ‘savage looking’ family members Koremitsu talked about.
(…)
At the same time, Honoka’s face froze the instant she saw Yū, who was supposed to be in Australia, right beside Koremitsu.
“Miss Kanai…!”
Koremitsu felt a chill in his heart the instant he heard Honoka’s shocked voice.
She knew that both Koremitsu and Yū were in love. She was the first one to read his feelings.

–You certainly are working hard here, Akagi. Have you fallen for Kanai?

Once she saw Koremitsu remain silent with a serious look, Honoka tried to joke around and divert the topic. At that time, she had already realized that he had feelings for Yū.
(And Shikibu ended up meeting Yū in such a situation!)
Though Yū had never met Asai, Aoi and Tsuyako directly before, they probably had heard rumors of Hikaru visiting her apartment. At this point, Asai was frowning at Yū, and Aoi harbored mixed feelings as she looked on. Yū should have known that Aoi was Hikaru’s fiancee, and that Asai was his cousin. She immediately tensed up, looking terrified.
(Argh, what a mess this has become!)
It was beyond Koremitsu’s capability to handle such situations.
At this moment, Koharu went out, calling for them,
“What’re you doing, making the guests wait on the corridor like this? Welcome them properly.”

After Koharu had prompted him, the gang went off to Koremitsu's room.
There was practically no space left once everyone sat on the tatamis in the room.
(What're you girls here for anyway?)
And all on the same day, to boot.
Honoka and Aoi probably came here, hoping for a reply to their confessions after the commotion involving Shioriko the previous day. What about Asai though? Why did Tsuyako came by too?
It was strange.
There was a tense, silent atmosphere permeating through this cramped room, and they seemed to be testing each other.
Hiina was the first one to start things off.
"Eh, it seems that everyone has a question to ask, so I'll ask this on behalf of everyone here. In other words, are Mr. Akagi and Miss Kanai dating?"
"!"
The females gathered at this place gasped in unison.
He sensed Honoka's stare.
It was helpless, sad, the same expression she showed when she asked whether Koremitsu liked Yū.
Naturally, Koremitsu was unable to say such words that would make it seem that he was running away.Yū's feeble expression was harboring expectations as she lifted her head at Koremitsu. Might as well admit this, maybe this can solve everything.
Yū was Koremitsu's girlfriend, the girl he wanted, and there was no room for anyone else to interferer. That would be fine.
But the moment he was about to say this–
His words were stuck in his throat the mom
Once she sensed Koremitsu's tentativeness, Yū lowered her eyes slightly.
At this moment, Shioriko, who had her cheeks puffed, yelled,
"I'm Big Brother's girlfriend! I just slept with him in the same bed last night!"
She placed her round knees upon the tatami as she pushed herself onto Koremitsu.
"Didn't you say it? You said that you'll take care of me until I grow up!"
Honoka's shoulders quivered, her eyebrows raised.
Is she about to kick him? But since she was seated on the tatami, she might hit him with the hand instead of the leg, or maybe she might throw the tea bowl at him. Koremitsu got down to guard himself, but Honoka lifted her head, saying.
"Sorry Shiiko. I'll make Akagi fall for me before you grow up."
"Wow. This new version of Miss Shikibu sure is different."
Hikaru marveled.
Aoi widened her eyes in shock, and Asai's shoulders were trembling.
Yū stared at Honoka tentatively, while Tsuyako and Hiina were grinning away.

“That’s right, Shiiko. Hono’s a strong opponent.”
Shioriko pouted, and argued,
“Don’t get cocky just because you dare to eat the 7-spice tempura! I can also eat some adult curry once I reach 10!”
At this moment, Aoi spoke seriously,
“I can only eat sweet curry, and I am not good at taking sugarless coffee. But I want Mr. Akagi to try some spicy curry I make.”
Asai was looking more enraged, her eyebrows crammed together.
Tsuyako was smiling away like a blooming red flower, saying,
“Oh my, I shall feed Mr. Akagi some super spicy red wine with my mouth then. I do have feelings for him; I will be angry if Miss Aoi and Miss Shikibu are to monopolize him.”
“Se-Senpai!? What’re you saying now!?”
“I can be a mistress, Mr. Akagi.”
“Goodness me, don’t make such a joke.”
“I am only half-joking about that though. Depending on your decision, I can add on to the seriousness in my words.”
Tsuyako narrowed her pretty eyes as she said.
“Ev-Even if my opponent is you, Upperclassman Tsuyako, I won’t hand Akagi to you.”
“I will not lose to you either, Miss Tsuyako. I also will not lose to Miss Shikibu and Shiiko.”
Honoka and Aoi declared.
“Big brother’s cellphone screen saver is a photo of me in a school swimsuit! There’s lots of pervy photos of me inside there!”
“Me! Me! I’ll join in too! If the Moon Matriarch is Mistress 1, I can be mistress 3 or 4. How about that, Mr. Akagi?”
Hiina showed Koremitsu her cleavage as she slowly leaned towards him.
Michiru’s eyes were spinning about as she said,
“M-M-M-M-Mr. Akagi! I-I-I don’t think it’s good to-to-to have something li-like a mis-mistress 1, 2 and 3! If you are really going to woo so many, I can be mistress 7…no-no, that was just me talking to myself, Hono!”
“Mr. Akagi, if you date me now, I can let you touch these breasts.”
“Oh? My breasts are much more beautifully curved. They’re more bouncy too.”
“Mr. Akagi does not look at others by their chest size.”
“Right, Akagi does like big breasts!”
“Is that true, Mr. Akagi!?”
“Shiiko here still has room for development, Big Brother!”
While everyone else was yapping away, Koremitsu had no idea as to who he was supposed to argue against or retort. There were several voices wailing away in his mind.
“You do have potential as a harem king after all, Koremitsu. Just as I had said.”
Hikaru floated about Koremitsu, speaking in a matter-of-fact tone.

(Is this a harem!? I don't feel happy at all! Were you always smiling away in the middle of such commotions? Can you still talk about flower knowledge so calmly in such situations?)
This isn't something a normal man can do!
Koremitsu was incredulous and amazed at Hikaru, unable to lash out at him.
While all the girls were insisting on themselves, surprise lingered on Yū's face, and Asai was still frowning, her arms folded.
After being in this state for quite a while, Asai finally spoke up.
"That is enough already, all of you!"
This sharp sword-like voice severed the commotion.
The dominion was such that everyone could only watch her silently.
Asai looked around with a chiding expression, saying,
"Such ruckus in someone else's house is going to sully the pride of a Heian Academy student. Do you not feel embarrassed by this? As the student council president, I cannot condone such acts that will damage the reputation of the school."
Aoi and Honoka were dejected, Hiina and Tsuyako were looking on with wry grins, seemingly thinking that they went overboard. Shioriko closed her mouth and glared at Asai, having made the decision not to oppose her when she was exerting so much pressure.
(That's some great help, Asa!)
He did not understand why Asai would be around, but it was great that she was around. That was what Koremitsu had thought.
"A love confession has to be fast and effective."
Asai spoke coldly.
And then, she turned her eyes at Koremitsu.
"I hope to have a relationship between opposite genders with you, Mr. Akagi."
Asai coldly declared.
Aoi widened her eyes, and everyone else were taken aback, their mouths open in shock.
Koremisu too was stupefied, ostensibly thrown into a different dimension.
"Well, this certainly is Asa's way of confessing."
Hikaru too grimaced.
(A love…confession?)
That term too was something of a different dimension, something he could not comprehend.
At this moment,

"This is bad, Akagi!"

Frantic footsteps could be heard, and Tōjō, carrying Lapis in his hand, opened the door with a look of terror.
"I just checked with the vet! Lapis' pregnant! Which cat's the father!? It has to be a noble blood one that can match her, right!? I won't forgive that cat if

it’s a stray, especially those fat, slobby ones with black and white all over it!”
After shouting all that, it seemed Tōjō realized the surrounding atmosphere.
“Eh, Aoi…”
“Big brother Shungo, that fat, black and white cat you talk about is just like Shell Blue at my house, no?”
Tōjō gasped as he saw Aoi glaring at him in annoyance.
“Lapis…is pregnant?”
And upon noticing Yū mutter this, Tōjō widened his eyes.
“Miss Kanai…! If there’s any other guests around, at least tell me beforehand!”
Tōjō raged.
He could only hum away, after having shown his silly side in front of Aoi, whom he doted, Yū, whom he had affections for, and the many girls present.
Lapis elegantly leapt out from his clutches and went towards Yū.
“Meow.”
It purred, ostensibly asking her if she was doing well.
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It was evening, and after everyone had left for home, Koremitsu sent Yū back. It seemed Yū was staying in a hospital in the city with the cutting edge medical treatment and the best inpatient care facility, with a lot of private rooms for the nursing staff to live in. Such accommodations were arranged by that kind acquaintance.
Hikaru informed him, “that is a hospital artistes and politicians will go to, and the personal staff rooms are as comfortable as a hotel rooms.”
The white hospital appeared to be a fortress. Koremitsu walked down a paved avenue that was ornamented beautifully, with the sunset shining upon them.
“Sorry for today…it’s the first time everyone’s gathered at my house like this…”
Koremitsu stammered as he excused himself.
“Mr Akagi…you’re rather popular.”
Yū, who had been silent all this while, muttered.
“Well, most of them are Hikaru’s exs. It’s his fault for making all those random promises, and I fulfilled them for him, so…”
“It’s the same…for me too…”
She muttered.
“Everyone likes you for how you worked hard to fulfill Hikaru’s promises, Mr Akagi…”
Koremitsu was speechless. It was impossible to read her mood from her serene, sidelong face.
(She’s angry…?)
Her tender fingertips touched Koremitsu’s fingers, and she clasped his hand.

“!”
While Koremitsu was startled, Yū bashfully lowered her head, whispering, “Mr Akagi, the girl with that white ribbon in your room…is Her Highness Aoi, no? Hikaru’s ex-fiancee…a blooming white, Hollyhock in the sacred place…there’s also Hikaru’s cousin…the proud Morning Glory that wakes up earlier than anyone else at sunrise…the Matriarch Asa. There is the Moon Matriarch…the most beautiful, poignant flower in Hikaru’s garden… the
weeping cherry blossom. That little girl is Shiiko, the young Murasaki
Perhaps these were all what Hikaru told her about in that room that was akin to the bottom of the sea.
Yū’s voice was so serene, tender as she mentioned the names of the flowers Hikaru loved. Hikaru, floating int he air, watched over the duo with a gentle expression; surely, he must have told Yū about this with such a face. Yū too might have listened to him with such a mood.
“The girl with the short haircut is…?”
“Oumi of the news club. She’s been sticking to me so that she can get a report on Hikaru.”
“What about that girl with wavy hair?”
“That’s our class rep, Hikaru’s Tachibana. She’s unimpressive, but she’s a premier flower with a nice fragrance.”
Yū lifted her head, seemingly probing at Koremitsu’s face. With a tone full of hesitance, she asked,
“Erm, that girl with the long legs, brown hair…and those feisty eyes is?”
“Shikibu’s…?”
For some reason, he hastily stopped talking.
Honoka’s appearance was so distinct in front of him, yet he could not find any way to describe her.
“She’s…the one whom you brought to my apartment…right, Mr Akagi?”
“Yeah.”
That was when Koremitsu assumed that Yū, holed up in her apartment, needed a female friend, and so he requested Honoka for that. Honoka herself heartily agreed, saying “Leave it to me.”
“…Shikibu’s my classmate, a good person…Hikaru once said that she’s like a Heliotrope.”
“A Heliotrope…?”
“It’s a purple flower originally from South America, that blooms towards the sun.”
“Towards the sun…”
Yū muttered.
“She’s definitely a cheerful, determined…wonderful person, no?”
“…yeah.”
Upon sensing the ambiguity in Yū’s words, Koremitsu started to stammer.
With a worried expression, Yū stared at Koremitsu.
“There were a lot of girls…I was shocked today, and I’m a little jealous…”

The guilt began to grow within Koremitsu.
“It is great to meet you again, Mr Akagi. I suppose I will be staying here for a little longer…can I still meet you again…?”
She asked tentatively in front of the main hospital entrance.
Feeling relieved from these words, Koremitsu answered.
“Yeah…of course.”
“I’ll send you a message.”
Yū bashfully whispered, turning her head around to hide her blushing face as she passed the doors.
In the midst of this sunset, Koremitsu watched that fluffy long hair vanish miserably.
That gloom was booming, swirling sweetly yet bitterly in his heart, a gloom or unknown form.
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“Welcome back, Yū.”
Yū opened the private staff room, and found a bespectacled, handsome looking boy with slender shoulders welcoming him.
“I did guess that it was time for you to come back, so I was waiting in your room. Did you speak with Mr Akagi?”
“Yes…”
Yū nodded, and the boy narrowed his eyes, seemingly worried as he asked.
“It seems that you’re a little unhappy though. Was the schedule too packed for you? Or did…you have some premonition?”
Yū was startled.
“That…isn’t the case…”
The boy placed his hand on Yū’s shoulder.
“Anyway, come in first. I have brewed some tea for you, and there are some delicious Meringue too. It is sweet enough to melt in your mouth.”
“E-erm…Mr Kazuaki…do you have something for me?”
Yū fidgeted once she realized someone was worried for her. Kazuaki himself gave an alluring, comforting smile, saying to her with the same rich, sweet voice Hikaru had.
“Yes, there is something I wish to ask of you, Yū. First, let me hear about this Mr Akagi. In details, of course…”

Chapter 2

It was the next morning.
Koremitsu scowled as he walked down the riverbank leading to school, and Hikaru spoke to him,
“What do you think, Koremitsu? Did you get an answer after meeting Yū?”
“Um…”
Koremitsu’s lips sank as he groaned.
He was brooding in his futon the previous night, but he still could not understand. He was happy to be reunited with Yū again, and his heart was pounding like crazy when they held hands at the park. When Hikaru

mentioned about this however, the feelings he had for Aoi and Honoka did not seem to be much different from how it was towards Yū.
(Am I being a Casanova here…?)
“What do you think?”
Koremitsu hissed a question.
“What do I think?”
“From the perspective of a harem prince, who do you think I like best?”
Hikaru however gave a matured smile.
“Only you know the answer, but well, if I have to decide, I do wish that you pick Asa.”
And nonchalantly stated something earth-shattering.
“Ack! You’re asking me to choose Saiga?”
“Miss Shikibu, Miss Aoi and Yū are all wonderful girls, and even if they are dumped by you, the people around them surely will not allow them to remain single, and one day, they should be able to get their best suited partner in life. It is a miracle in itself that Asa was able to fall in love, and I assume that it may never happen again. I suppose it is a rarity to have an eccentric—no, a brave man who can understand Asa’s charms, so open-minded in accepting her. I do get the feeling Asa will continue to remain dateless and search for Tsuchinokos, or set up some nursery for them or something like that.”
Koremitsu’s temples were popping as he listened to Hikaru’s words. Soon after, he raised his eyebrows, yelling,
“That girl isn’t someone who likes to laugh out loud at all, is it!?”
“Of course not. Asa will give a hearty laugh when she does find something really amusing.”
“You’re kidding me.”
“It is true. When she was younger, she kept laughing when she saw a dog with eyebrows, until she went limp…”
Hikaru continued to promote (?) Asai, but Koremitsu ignored him as he walked through the door, only to be called up by Tōjō.
Tōjō glared at Koremitsu, and the latter assumed the former was about to begrudge him for what happened the prior day, only for him to say.
“I wish to give Aoi my support, and I do not want to make her cry. However, I hope that you can grant Asai her promise. I suppose Aoi will have lots of opportunities in the future, but as for Asai, despite her good looks and beauty, given her condescending attitude towards men…it will be troublesome if she is to remain single and became the aloof, obstinate advisor of the Mikados.”
During the break, Hiina too cheerfully chimed in,
“I do hope that you choose the Matriarch Asa amongst those girls. It seems that it will be ‘her first love and her last love’, no? I will recommend a nice person for Miss Shikibu.”
During the following break,
“Come along, Mr. Akagi.”

Koremitsu was dragged by Tsuyako into the Japanese Dance Club room.
“You are incapable of being like Hikaru. Hikaru was able to love so many girls equally and make them happy because he is special, and also because he was unable to be united with his most beloved. You can only go along with your usual honest self and do what you can do.”
After imparting some advise, Tsuyako then gave a cheeky expression, saying,
“Personally, I do wish you will be together with Miss Asai.”

“Why is everyone pairing me up with Asa!?”
It was lunch break, and Koremitsu was walking down the corridor with his back arched, grumbling away. No matter who he met since this particular morning, every single person had been recommending that he get together with Asai.
“Because you are the only one who can change Asa into a cute, smiling girl.”
“Am I a tamer now!?”
Thanks to all that, while Koremitsu himself never thought of Asai as a love interest, the piercing stare and frosty expression just appeared in his mind.
(Well, she’s a lot more relaxed now as compared to how she was at first… and I do find her personality rather interesting…but it’s impossible for me! I can’t imagine Asa laughing here!”
While Koremitsu was hollering in his heart.
Appearing in front of his eyes was a stoic-looking Asai.
“Ugh.”
While Koremitsu readied himself,
“Do not be mistaken.”
A blizzard-like voice rang as she coldly noted,
“Do you think I will fall in love with you? I declared that in front of everyone else so that we will not be suspected whenever I am with you.”
Hikaru, floating above, *“Ah~”* could only cover his face as he groaned for some reason.
(Why yeah, it’s impossible for Asa to be associated with love or falling in love. She’s someone condescending, always talking to others with that annoyingly haughty tone.)
Koremitsu himself found the reason plausible, and was quietly relieved.
“Goodness, I went to visit your classroom after the culture festival ended, and even Mr. Tōjō was there. It was a ruckus…”
(Huh? She was there at that time?)
Before Koremitsu could retort, Asai’s eyes grew rigid as she muttered.
“Also, it seems that something grievous centered around you is going to happen.”
“What do you mean?”

Was it about the confessions he suddenly received? However, Tsuyako and Hiina were just adding on to the fire, and the only ones he never actually responded to were Honoka and Aoi…
But even so, Koremitsu had a rough idea of what it was, and was left dumbfounded. Asai's face got increasingly heinous as she pulled her cellphone out, showing it to Koremitsu.
"I received this message on the night before yesterday."
Koremitsu looked at the screen, and gasped.
Hikaru's too froze as he peered from the side.

"Koremitsu Akagi shall judge the women of Lord Hikaru under the name of the Poppy."

(What is this…?)
The voice was stuck in his throat.
The chain of messages that were themed 'The women of Lord Hikaru' appeared in his mind as grimy, black words.
It was too much even as a joke, and this anonymous message was nauseating.
This time, it mentioned his name!
Koremitsu felt enraged terrified, a chill running down his spine.
"Saiga, did anything bad happen to you after this message came?"
Koremitsu angrily asked, and Asai calmly answered,
"No, nothing has changed. This message themed 'Lord Hikaru's women' was simply sent to me, just as before. However, this time, it contained the active verb 'judge', and actually mentioned that you of all people are to do this."
The words got tangled into a black mist, spreading in Koremitsu's heart.
Hikaru's expression too gloomed.
"…"
Till this point, the women mentioned in the messages were Yū, Tsuyako, Asai and Sora. Since they were Hikaru's women, there was a chance Aoi herself could be in danger.
"I feel we should go about pretending to date and agitate the culprit. Of course, it is just a pretense."
"I'll go over to Aoi! I'll go check on Upperclassman Tsuyako to see if she got any strange messages."
Koremitsu cut off Asai's words as he sprinted out.
Tsuyako never mentioned anything about the message when the duo chatted in the clubroom in the morning. However, she and the other girls all gathered at Koremitsu's house; perhaps they were going to discuss the mysterious message with him?"
"Mr. Akagi, I am yet to be done—"
Asai hollered at Koremitsu, trying to get him to stay, but the latter never stopped.

“I had not finished what I wanted to say. He really is a simpleton of a wild dog.”
Asai anxiously watched the messy red hair leave the scene.
“Yes…we were not to be real lovers, just false ones. That should have been the most efficient…”
Once she sensed her face blushing, she muttered to herself, ostensibly searching for an excuse. At this moment, her cellphone vibrated.
With a scowl, she opened the message. “!” And with a heinous glare, she stared at the screen.
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Koremitsu panted furiously as he reached Aoi’s classroom. Once he got there, he glared around with his sharp eyes, and spotted Aoi fiddling with her phone, her face frozen.
Koremitsu felt a frost air scale his spine.
Hikaru too looked on grimly.
“Aoi.”
Once Koremitsu called for Aoi, the latter’s petite shoulders shivered. She looked over at Koremitsu tensely, her face looking very uneasy, perturbed as she approached him.
“Is something the matter, Mr. Akagi?”
“Did you just see the mail? Was there something strange sent to you?”
Aoi’s shoulders shivered again.
She turned her eyes away from Koremitsu, stammering.
Affirming that Aoi received a message, Koremitsu sounded agitated.
“You received it, right? You came to my house yesterday to discuss about this, didn’t you?”
“E-erm…but! I received such a message two days ago. While I am used to receiving such scathing messages….I would immediately delete them and forget about it whenever I have them.”
“Can I see that message?”
“Sorry. I deleted it.”
After inquiring about the message, it seemed it was the exact same content as what Asai received, stating the infuriating words that Koremitsu was to deal judgement on all the girls surrounding Hikaru.
“Of course, I do not believe that you will do such a thing, Mr. Akagi.”
Aoi pleaded.
“Thanks.”
But while Koremitsu thanked her, when he inquired if there was any further matter, she merely tried to pass it off by repeating over and over again,
“Well, I am fine.”
And when he went to ask Tsuyako,
“Oh? It reached you?”
Tsuyako simply admitted that she received the message.

“But there are people who enjoy seeing others suffer. Besides, this is not uncommon in this school filled with children from many traditional families. You do not have to mind, Mr. Akagi. It is pointless to be befuddled, intimidated or infuriated by those things. All you will accomplish is to delight that sender.”
But Koremitsu, himself, was the one encouraged.
Lunch break was about to end, and Koremitsu still felt something was amiss as he prepared to return to the classroom.
And while he was clicking his tongue agitatedly, Hikaru spoke with a grim look above him,
“I did think those messages were just being sent, and nothing will actually happen…”
“I won’t be judging Saiga and the rest. No way you want such things to happen, right?”
“Of course. But—”
“What? That you actually have a wish for me to help you take revenge?”
“No. That is not what I want to talk about.”
Hikaru frowned.
“All I am thinking is, are the messages all that is to come?”
Such words caused Koremitsu’s temples to twitch.
“It does feel like this is different from before…I am worried. Miss Aoi does look like she has something she could not say…”
“Something she could not say?”
“Or maybe it is something she does not wish to talk about…”
In any case, they should head back to the classroom first. First off, he had to give Yū a call just in case, even though he did not think she would be involved after staying in Australia for so long.
(Let’s try asking Oumi…and Shikibu.)
Koremitsu did not say anything to Honoka in the morning, besides the usual greetings. She beamed, saying,
“Good morning…Akagi! It’s great to see Miss Kanai back. But I won’t lose to her!”
Her energetic voice sounded a little forced, and one had to wonder if she was concerned about the reply to the confession and the matter about Yū. She kept peeking at Koremitsu during the lessons, but she never did talk to him.
(I got to give a proper reply. To both Shikibu…and Aoi…)
Would he be able to get an answer while Yū stayed in Japan?
With such matters happening at this point, it was not a time when he could simply ponder over the relationship between boy and girls…
Feeling utterly vexed, his back was slouched more than ever.
And just when he arrived in front of his classroom, the cellphone in his pocket vibrated.
Having an ominous vibe, he opened it.

“Koremitsu Akagi shall torch Yū Kanai alive under the name of the Poppy.”

Feeling a jolt inside his heart, he hurriedly grabbed the phone sliding out of his hand.
“Koremitsu! This!”
Hikaru too sounded tense.
The bell indicating the beginning of the 5th period chimed, but Koremitsu ignored it as he gave Yū a call.
His gut was griped, wincing, and sweat trickled down his body.
“Mr…Akagi?”
Yū’s skeptical voice came from the other end of the receiver.
Anxiety pressed down on Koremitsu as he exhaled, caressing his skin.
“Yū! Are you hurt in any way?”
He asked agitatedly.
“Eh?”
“Are you hurt?”
“Erm…just a little scalded.”
Koremitsu felt hammered. The words ‘torch Yū Kanai alive’ was magnified greatly in front of his eyes.
Yū was actually physically hurt, and not just as how the message stated.
Being scalded was as close as it was to being torched, and Koremitsu felt a chill down his spine.
“Yū, where are you right now?”
“At…the hospital.”
“The hospital? I’ll be there right away.”
Koremitsu hung up without hearing Yū’s reply, and sprinted off.
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Upon seeing Koremitsu sprinting down the corridor like a man possessed, Honoka’s chest ached as she stood at the classroom entrance.
“Yū!” She did hear Koremitsu yell at the phone, the conviction and turmoil of emotions he showed, and her body felt scorched as she clenched her fist to endure.
(Akagi, were you talking to Miss Kanai just now?)
Koremitsu called out to her with such a voice, such an expression, and one had to wonder that surely, he was only thinking about her. Was his desire to meet her so great that he skipped classes and ran away from school?
“Koremitsu Akagi shall judge the women of Lord Hikaru under the name of the Poppy.”
Two nights ago, she received this strange message, and was feeling very worried. At this moment, Michiru gave Honoka and call, and after discussing about this,
“Let’s visit Mr. Akagi.”
Michiru suggested, and so they visited Koremitsu’s house.

They spotted a hesitant looking Aoi at the entrance, following by a grim looking Asai, and even Hiina appeared.
“Wow. Is everyone here to meet Mr. Akagi? He’s becoming quite the popular item recently. Come on, let’s go.”
And with Hiina dragging them along, the predicament was that every single one of them visited his house.
Koremitsu was not at home, so everyone else was waiting in his room.
Shioriko had her cheeks puffed as she served them tea. Asai remained silent with a frosty look on her face. Aoi had her head lowered, looking frustrated about something. Honoka herself was feeling awkward.
And when Koremitsu finally returned home, there was a dreamy, slender girl standing beside him, Yū Kanai.

—Have you fallen for Kanai?

Honoka could never forget the stunned look Koremitsu gave when she asked.
It was a defenseless, feeble look.
A flustered look of one who noticed he was in love.
At that moment, Koremitsu was really in love with Yū Kanai.
And Honoka herself too realized that she fell for Koremitsu, who in turn had fallen for Yū Kanai.

—I think, I like you.

Once
Once Yū flew off to Australia, Honoka confessed at the school rooftop with a blushing face and a trembling voice.
Ever since then, she had been hoping for Koremitsu to devote his attention to her.
She was heartbroken to realize from up close that his feelings were veering towards Aoi, and she felt all hope was lost when a teary-faced Koremitsu held hands with Aoi.
However, she finally decided to confront Koremitsu with her true feelings.
She had no hope of beating Aoi, and with Yū of all people returning to Japan, it was too much for her. She started thinking whether there was no God in this world, and when she accidentally spotted Koremitsu being so attentively, running towards Yū, her heart was ripped apart.
(No. I can’t continue to like Akagi if I admit defeat because of this.) She understood when she saw the girls gathered at Koremitsu’s house.
Many girls liked Koremitsu. She had assumed she was the only one who liked such a crude, eccentric boy, and got careless. Clearly, this was completely wrong.
Koremitsu Akagi was popular.

(Everyone now knows that Akagi's scary looking, but he's really a nice guy inside. Even so, I've decided not to give up, and I won't be dejected because of it. I'll do my best.)
The teacher entered the classroom, spotted Koremitsu's empty seat, and asked "What happened to Akagi?"
Honoka immediately stood up.
"Akagi's feeling unwell. He's off to the hospital."
And returned to her seat.
The teacher never did pursue the matter, perhaps because Honoka was a studious student.
But under the table, she was slowly answering the inquiries of girls, frustrated with their love live, under the guise of the love expert Purple Princess.
"Purple Princess, please listen to me □:△:). I had a crush on F for 5 years, and it seems like he knows that I like him~~~~~□□>O< □□Now he's trying to avoid me. What do I do know?"
"I really like T, but he's going to transfer to another school next month.
(TωT) I want to convey my feelings to him."
"Purple Princess, I want to give the one I like a really shocking birthday present, but I'm troubled as to what I should give. Please let me hear your suggestion. m(__)m."
(Everyone's working hard. I got to do my best too.)
Honoka's lips curled, her eyebrows frowning as she tapped her fingers.
Suddenly, a message reached her.
Once she opened the message, Honoka gasped. The words were written in large red font.

"Yū Kanai is the culprit."
◇
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Mother would harass father's mistress, insisting that she was the wretch who bewitched him, an ugly woman, and told her to die.
The child born with that woman's blood is also wretched, filthy.
A child that should not be born.

My brother…

Mother told me never to talk to him, so I could only watch that child from afar, unable to approach him.
Mother said he was a filthy child, but that child was truly beautiful, smiling blissfully with everyone surrounding him.
He never did notice me, never gave me a glance, and continued to smile under the spring sun and the cooling breeze.

◇
◇ ◇
Koremitsu indicated his name at the hospital counter, and was taken to the ward
He ascended the glass elevator, advanced down the wide corridor, and knocked on the door.
The knob could be heard turning inside, and Yū tentatively poked her head through the gap between the door.
It was a direct echo to when Koremitsu first went to find Yū when she locked herself inside her apartment. Yū stared at Koremitsu tentatively, unwilling to open the door.
“Mr Akagi…don’t you have classes?”
“I played truant.”
Once he said that with a grim look, she lowered her shoulders.
Yū looked rather forlorn, causing Koremitsu’s head to cool, and in turn, flustered.
“Did I cause you trouble by suddenly coming here…?”
Yū lowered her head, tentative as she answered.
“Sorry. I was worried when I heard you got scalded. Are you bandaged already? Is it alright for you not to recuperate?”
Yū opened the door.
“Please come in…”
“O-okay.”
Koremitsu stepped inside tensely.
Unlike the cramped, dim apartment back then that was filled with rubbish, the ward room behind the door was wide and spacious, the bright sunlight shining through the large windows.
As Hikaru had mentioned, it was a room similar to a hotel room, not simply a commercialized one, but a luxurious suite.
“I got scalded…but it’s really nothing much.”
Yū reached her hand out, looking a little embarrassed, her speckless, tender fingers giving the OK sign.
“I wanted to brew some tea…but I got careless…so…I scalded my hand…a little.”
Her white cheeks was increasingly crimson.
“Is that it?”
Koremitsu held Yū by the hand as he lowered his head, his tone relaxed.
“…Yes.”
Yū nodded as she whispered.
“I-is that so?’
“Thank goodness, Yū.”
Hikaru, right beside Koremitsu, heaved a sigh of relief, and Koremitsu himself too was relieved. Upon recalling the impulsive actions of his, the fiery embarrassment caused his face to sizzle.
He let go of Yū’s hand, his body fidgeting.

“So-sorry for yelling into the phone. I received a strange message, so I was really worried about you.”
“Strange…message?”
“Erm, that’s…”
Koremitsu did not want to talk about the message stating that he was going to torch her. Yū herself was once bullied by other girls, and shut herself in. Perhaps she would be horrified if he was to mention this to her.
“Just some usual harassing message. Did you receive any spam message yourself?”
“Like I can get a high income staying at home…Mika of the Pink Club or something…my husband was eaten by a Polar Bear…something like that?”
“Yeah. There’s a lot of them. There’s no need to really think too much into it.”
Koremitsu bluffed his way too.
And he told himself, “it’s a coincidence that Yū scalded herself.”
But Yū kept looking at Koremitsu worriedly.
And Koremitsu too found the situation awkward.
“Argh, I’m really unbecoming of myself. My face is hot, I’m sweaty, and I’m upset. Don’t mind if I use the washroom. Which room is it?”
He wanted to wash his head to cool down, and walked forward.
“N-no!”
Yū grabbed Koremitsu by the sleeve of his uniform.
“Eh?”
“So-sorry, but you can’t go there…the washroom, that is…I’m cleaning it at the moment, and I’m not done yet…i-it’s dirty now…and…I’m sorry.”
Yū kept looking at the door, her voice squeaky.
“Ah, I-I see…”
Yū did not seem to mind how messy her apartment was back then though?
Koremitsu was perplexed.
Hikaru too looked bewildered by this.
However, Yū showed no intention of wanting to allow Koremitsu into the room, and her slender fingers were tugging firmly at his sleeve.
“E-erm, I’ll go get a wet cloth…please…wait here, Mr Akagi…do-don’t move. And…no peeping.”
She gave him a feeble look, ran towards the washroom, and cautiously opened the door.
She peered inside carefully, wary of a spirit popping out as she opened the door just wide enough to squeeze through, and when she entered, she locked the door.
“Koremitsu.”
Hikaru suddenly noted grimly,
“Look over at the sofa.”
Koremitsu did as he was told, turning towards the sofa.

There was a laptop at the side table, and it was opposite the sofa, covered by a white cover that would be conspicuous with any stains on it. He spotted a red flower on top of that.
That flower had a few thin, near translucent petals, the iris was red, and it looked salacious.
(What's that…Gerbera? Tulips…doesn't look like it.)
Koremitsu did remember seeing a flower similar in appearance, as he was not as interested in flowers as Hikaru was, and he could not remember the name.
(What's with this flower? Why's Hikaru looking so grim?)
Hikaru gave Koremitsu a grim look, stating,

"It is the Poppy plant."

(!)
Koremitsu's heart jolted.
(A Poppy?)
He leaned forward towards the alluring, feminine flower in the red veil, resting on the white sofa. At this moment, Yū returned with a wet cloth.
The door opened, startling Koremitsu, and he turned around.
Her cheeks reddened, Yū's face was slightly lowered as she tentatively brought the towel to him.
"Please…use this to wipe your sweat."
"Ah, thanks."
The towel was a little cold. Yū was surrounded with a fragrance unbefitting of her.
While Koremitsu wiped his sweat, Yū lowered her head worriedly, her eyes turning towards the washroom from time to time.
While she was feeling worried,
"Hey, what's with that flower?"
Koremitsu hissed, and Yū's slender shoulders jolted timidly.
"F-flower…?"
"On the sofa."
"I-it's a flower…someone gave as a get well gift. I found it pretty…so I had him give me one…"
Yū whispered, her eyes not meeting Koremitsu's.
"Isn't it better to put it in a cup or something? Make sure not to let it wilt. You did ask that person to share it with you."
"You're…right."
Yū again peered towards the door, and cringed, answering,
"I'll put it in."
She was acting like a bullied child.
Koremitsu was getting angsty.
"Yū, do you know the name of the flower?"

Yū was silent as she hesitated, and soon after, she continued with her faint, fleeting voice,
“…The Poppy…”
While it was not strange for Yū to know the name of the flower, her tentative voice and the feeble expression that was peeping at the washroom caused Koremitsu to feel incessantly anxious.
There was probably something beyond that door. What would happen if he was to ignore Yū and open the door?
Such an impulse grew within Koremitsu, and he glared at the washroom door.
At this moment, Yū’s voice grew increasingly softer.
“Sorry…Mr Akagi…I do have plans later…so, please return for today.”
♢
♢ ♢
(Miss Kanai is the culprit…what’s with that?)
It was night.
Honoka had her elbows resting on the desk in her bedroom, staring worriedly at the message she received at noon.

“Yū Kanai is the culprit.”

The large red words formed this line.

Who was the sender? Who knew about Yū, and knew that she met Honoka…?
There were only a few choices.
She thought of the girls gathered at Koremitsu's house, and immediately shook her head.
She was not willing to think of the possibility that there was a wretched person who would send such a despicable message.
But if the person was really amongst them.
Would the aim be to eliminate Yū, the focus of Koremitsu's attention?
(In that case, I guess I better convey the message to Akagi…and I'm not sure what's the objective of the "Koremitsu Akagi shall judge" part…is the sender this time…the same as the ones before…)
In that case, it would be all the more confusing as to why the person sent such a message.
Was it just to provoke others?
Honoka wanted to delete the message, and moved her finger towards the delete button, only to stop.
"What if…it's real?"
What if Yū Kanai really did so something criminal?
Honoka could not ignore the slender, shy Yū, prone to hiding in the room and not coming out, would dare to do something so audacious. Something was amiss.
(But, what if she's fooled…or something.)
Yū herself seemed quite innocent, and in her case, it was possible. Upon thinking about this, Honoka felt stifled, her head turbulent.
(Maybe that had something to do with Akagi skipping class…)
Koremitsu, who was contacting Yū on the phone, was looking grim. It seemed he was worried for her.
(Do I discuss the message with Akagi? No, can't do this. I don't know whether this is real here, and if it's just a prank, he'll just be worried for no reason.)
"I'll be there."
Honoka recalled Koremitsu looking so agitated as he sprinted off, and did not want him to look so hideous again.
"Argh, what do I do know? I'll leave a message on a forum…I can't possibly do that now! There's no way I can say 'my love rival may be a criminal. What do I do?'"
Honoka threw her phone onto the table, cupping her head as she thought hard, swiveling around on her chair.
At this moment, the phone chimed, indicating a message.
"!"
The sender was anonymous.
Honoka nervously opened the message.
This time, it was a line crammed with words.

“Yū Kanai has betrayed Koremitsu Akagi, having an illicit affair with other men.”

“She returned back to sell off the drugs imported from overseas.”

“The codename is the Poppy.”

“Yū Kanai’s fragile sight is merely a facade.”

“Her heart is of complete darkness.”

The words shot into Honoka’s eyes as arrows, stabbing through her heart.
(Illicit relationship with other men—selling drugs—Poppy? Isn’t that the same message the sender gave—?)
There was also a website indicating a forum where Yū was said to be involved drug trafficking.
What if—
If this message was the truth.
Or if not all, that there was at least some truth in it.
(How am I supposed to say this to Akagi!?)
Honoka stared at the website so intently, her eyes got numb, and clicked on it.
◇
◇ ◇
Your personality has to be fitting of a prestigious family.

You cannot be a wretched person.

You cannot be a despicable person.

You cannot fall into treachery.

Mother kept repeating these words at me.
Mother was strict in my upbringing.
She would yell. Why can you not do this? It is embarrassing that the child of a prestigious family cannot understand such a simple matter. If others are to feel that my child is useless, I, along with my family, will not be as highly regarded.
Mother’s family had lasted since the Heian era, and is one filled with a long history. She mentioned that she too was raised in such a harsh manner.
My hands would be hit whenever I played the piano, when I wrote words, when I made calculation mistakes. My body would freeze whenever I wondered when I would be hit.
At this moment, I would imagine my brother would give that blissful smile in the tender, dazzling light.

And then, the red flowers swayed at the bottom of my head.
Alluring me with a sweet, tender voice.

Pluck me.
I shall grant you the power of the spider.

I shall devour all that you despise.

Come, first, fixate on your enemies using my 'eyes'.
Reveal the secrets of the filthy women, who, so akin to the white flowers with their feeble, slender vines, lean upon men and latch onto them as a parasite.

Chapter 3

"The Poppy flower is the name of the flower held by the Conqueror's beloved consort Yu."
Hikaru explained with a gloomy look on the night they returned from the hospital.
"The hero Xiang Yu, active during the late Qin Dynasty, lost to another hero Liu Bang. Consort Yu followed him until the very end, and killed herself—In the Chinese lessons, some said that Xiang Yu, pursued at the very end, was singing, "Ah, Yu, my Yu. What will your fate be?" You have heard of this story before, no? It was said that bloody red flowers bloomed from the consort Yu's grave, and that was how the name 'Yu flower', or 'Poppy' came about. The wavy petals would flap with a mere breeze, and while it may look pitiful, it does seem to allure you in a bewitching manner. It is that kind of flower with an unstable charm."
The name of the flower Koremitsu received in the message was the Poppy. Surely, the fact that there was a flower with the same name in Yū's room would be linked to this.
"I don't understand. Maybe it's just a coincidence."
Hikaru frowned hard, and the tense atmosphere pervaded, his face looking conflicted.
"But the Poppy flower is not one that will bloom at this time. It probably was displayed in flower shops over a month back or so. It is not a flower that can be obtained so easily in this season…"
Hikaru himself was a little curious that she never did put such a rare flower in a vase, merely dumping it on the sofa.
Yū mentioned that it was a flower from a visitor, but that explanation was fallible.
She merely gave a glance at the washroom, and already, she wished for Koremitsu to quickly return.
"The floral language of the Poppy is solace, delusion—that is what it means. Another name for Poppy is Papaveraceae. Perhaps it had such a floral language for it was it is a breed of Poppy that can be extracted for drugs."
Drugs—Koremitsu's heart jolted upon those words.

“The Papaver Poppy itself is non-toxic, and it is not a criminal act to grow them at home. It does have a similar appearance however.”
Hikaru’s face again sobered as he mentioned this.
“Yū’s acting strange.”
“Yeah…she does not seem happy to meet you today. She even looked a little troubled.”
One would hope that she merely had trivial matters to attend to…
After worrying about it, he sent a message,
“Sorry for visiting you so suddenly.”
Yū’s reply came in the next morning.
” I, too, apologize for what happened”
It was hard to understand through words alone what Yū was ‘apologizing’ for. There were so many issues Yū had yet to talk about, so he could only deduce from what he received.

Koremitsu ate his breakfast while listless, and saw Shioriko with that face devoid of energy.
“Big brother Koremitsu…I’m going to school along with you.”
She pleaded with a gloomy voice.
“Okay.”
Koremitsu answered glumly. It was the first time he departed from home early with her due to her school arrival time, but she remained silent for quite a while.
“Are you still angry about Lapis?’
“No…”
“Then, is it about Shikibu and the rest at our house before this?”
“…”
Koremitsu seemed to be saying “No” with that faint voice of his, and he remained silent till they they reached the elementary school.
“Lapis ran away, and Shiiko’s beloved big brother got snatched by other women. She really must be feeling lonely.”
Hikaru muttered.
Koremitsu felt a little heartbroken within to see Shioriko depart haplessly with her backpack, but at this point, he was simply thinking about Yū.
He was planning to look through Shioriko’s homework on one hand, but on the other, he was sending messages to Yū, asking if he could visit her after school. He was troubled.
Perhaps she would find him annoying. Having said that, Koremitsu did not know how long Yū would reside in Japan. He finally had the chance to be reunited with her, and he could not allow such dissatisfaction cloud their farewell.
And of course, was Yū really safe?
He wondered as he entered the classroom, and the seat beside him was empty.
(Shikibu isn’t here yet?)

Though he was thinking (I'm early today though) at that moment…
Noon break had already passed when he realized something was amiss.
The classroom was the same as usual, and so was the corridor. There were also his familiar classmates, acquaintances.
However, something seemed to be amiss.
Something seemed to be changing little by little, subtle enough not to be detected, and he was feeling tense, wondering where everyone else was.
Honoka never did attend school on this day, and the seat beside Koremitsu was empty.
"It's rare for Hono to take leave. There was a flu outbreak in middle school that caused the school to be closed, and she was the only one feeling alright."
I sent some messages, but I didn't get any replies. I wonder if she's sleeping due to a fever…or is her belly rumbling due to ache… Michiru worriedly asked.
Koremitsu too felt angsty seeing the seat beside him empty during class.
When he was strolling down the corridor during break time, he noticed Aoi looking dejected, whispering something.
And just when he tried to approach her, the chime rang from the side, and she vanished..
After that, he went to the student council office to discuss the message with Asai later on.
"I am busy. Return back."
Asai spoke with an uncannily frigid voice.
That was not all.
During the following break, he was concerned about Aoi, and went to her classroom, only to notice Aoi and Asai walking in opposite directions.
Neither of them did notice Koremitsu, and upon seeing each other, they averted their eyes elsewhere, the atmosphere frozen the moment their eyes met.
"Is something the matter with Asa and Miss Aoi?"
Hikaru wondered with a frown.
After Aoi learned of Asai's true feelings during the summer vacation, a rift developed between them. Even beyond that however, they were important childhood friends to each other, and there were signs that the relationship between them was improving. Aoi was doing her best to avoid reliance on Asai, and Asai too kept taking care of Aoi not because Aoi was a fragile childhood friend, but as an equal.
That was the analysis Hikaru gave as he watched them calmly. Koremitsu too was relieved.
But having met the duo, he could only sense acrimony and contempt towards each other.
He hurried off after Aoi.
"Hey! Did something happen between you and Asa?"

He called out to Aoi, and the latter was startled as she noticed Koremitsu's face.
"Nothing at all. Please do not worry about me."
She answered, her eyes looking away from Koremitsu before she left.
Tsuyako probably would know a thing or two, and during that noon break, he hurried towards the Japanese Dance Clubroom. He found Tsuyako seated in a seiza, spacing out at the roof, and even after Koremitsu spoke to her,
"Eh, yes, I suppose."
She gave a vague answer.
"Sorry, I was up the entire night, and my mind is not really functional now. Maybe another time."
There was none of the usual luster on her beaming face.
In that case, Koremitsu decided to look for Hiina, but he never did. He went to her classroom, looking for her, only for her classmates to state that she had returned home.
"What is going on?"
Koremitsu let out a displeased voice.
It had been one strange thing after another since morning.
"Everyone's saying things completely different from what they're thinking. It's uncomfortable having that itchy feeling on my back."
While Koremitsu grumbled, Hikaru grimaced worriedly.
"Maybe…there is something that cannot be said."
What do you mean? He wanted to ask.
At that moment however, the cellphone in his pocket vibrated.
Koremitsu clicked his tongue, and affirmed the sender.
"Another anonymous message?"
He opened the inbox, and the message showed.

"Koremitsu Akagi shall execute Yū Kanai by hanging in the name of the Poppy."

"—"
First torching, and now hanging?
He hurriedly sent a call to Yū's cellphone, but she was busy.
Perhaps it was another prank. There was still some time till lessons ended, and he already did play truant the previous day, so not this day.
However, at this moment, if Yū was to be some form of danger.
"Koremitsu."
While Hikaru was calling out for him, Koremitsu had already walked away.
(Damn it. Who sent such messages?)
He really wanted to fish out this culprit, who had been hiding his identity while reveling in hurting others from the darkness.
His eyes got fiery, his rage suffocating as it seared, and he dashed towards the hospital he was at the previous day, ignoring how sweaty he was. He signed in at the counter, only to be told that Yū was out, not in her room.

“Where did she go!?”
“She didn’t say.”
Koremitsu asked Hikaru of any possible places she could have gone to.
Hikaru however looked defeated as he answered,
“I cannot think of any other places besides your house and her old apartment. Yū had always been the indoor type.”
He kept calling her, only to reach the voicemail every time, and while he paced around the corridor grimly,
“Akagi…”
“Shikibu!”
For some reason, Honoka appeared.
Koremitsu himself was surprised, but Honoka widened her eyes, shaking her head about as she appeared to be looking for a place to hide.
“You took the day off today? Why are you in uniform? I don’t think you’re here to got some flu prescription.”
“Er-erm, I-I-I’m here because of a relative! He’s hospitalized here due to a sudden illness! I’m here to visit!”
“Visit?”
Honoka’s shoulders suddenly jolted in shock. Her eyebrows were clenched for just a moment, and she showed a cowed look, before tensing her face and saying,
“I got to go. That relative asked me to buy the weekly magazine that’s sold today. See you then!”
“Hey, Shikibu.”
He called out to her, but she never did look back as she ran off at startling speed.
“Koremitsu, you should give Miss Shikibu a word of advice that she cannot be running down the corridors of a hospital at full sprint.”
Hikaru chimed with an austere look.
(Shikibu’s being rather lively today, isn’t she? But wasn’t she showing a helpless look for a moment just now?)
While Koremitsu squirmed his lips as he pondered, Yū, passing by Honoka, returned.
“…Mr. Akagi.”
Yū widened her eyes upon seeing him, and again, she looked perturbed.
“Erm…sorry about yesterday.”
“N-no, I was wrong too for rushing over here out of a sudden.”
Yū did not appear to be hurt in any way. Surely it was a prank message stating that she was to be hanged or something, and Koremitsu’s ears seared in fury and regret for being lured in by such a thing. However, he was relieved to see that she was fine.
“I received some…Chinese…floral tea. Do you mind…having some too…Mr. Akagi?”
“You sure?”
Yū nodded.

She was a little terse, but she did not seem too bothered that Koremitsu was present.
“Thank goodness, Koremitsu. You are finally able to patch things up with Yū.”
Hikaru beamed.
(Oh, yeah.)
His nose gradually heated, Koremitsu walked along with Yū.
“When we mention Chinese tea, surely they are to be classified as artistic. The flowers will slowly bloom when you pour hot water into the buds, and a fresh aroma will spread.”
Hikaru floated above them, displaying his trivial knowledge.
Yū opened the door carefully.
“P-please…”
“Thanks.”
Koremitsu was as tense as one making a home visit to his girlfriend’s house for the first time.
And such a sight entered his eyes.
“!”
There was a crimson umbrella hanging on the rack beside the wall, with a handle that was atypical of an umbrella, a rope tied around it, dangling off the protrusion on the wall.
Black water dripped down the front end of the umbrella, leaving black trails on the wall, and black marks on the carpet.

It was an umbrella dangled downwards—

That was akin to a corpse hung on the head by a noose.
Yū, right beside Koremitsu, whimpered.
Her eyes widened, the massive terror spreading in her eyes. Her white skin instantly paled, and her slender shoulders kept shivering.
Back then, Yū tossed her favorite umbrella out, and she was covered in dirt after she went to look for it in the rain.
It was later on that she hanged the umbrella, covered in mud, in the school chemistry lab.
Because of these, Yū was dubbed the vengeful spirit, and shut herself in.
She became terrified of the rain and umbrellas. She personally put back the wrecked umbrella into her father’s golf bag, which she called the tower of prayer.
Clearly, if the sight of the swaying black, stained umbrella dripping black water was meant to harken Yū’s nightmares, and it worked.
Yū’s body began to stumble.
Koremitsu hurriedly helped Yū to stand.
He took the umbrella away, brought it out of the window and handed it to a staff member. The fury practically blew his head apart, and when he handed

the black umbrella to the staff member, his nefarious eyes caused the staff member to shudder.
“Damn it, did that sender do this?”
He muttered as he entered the room. Hikaru too frowned.
“I am worried about Yū. What happens if she ends being reclusive again?”
When Koremitsu returned however, Yū was done wiping off all the marks on the wall and the floor.
Her face remained pale,, and fear could obviously be felt from her eyes, yet she continued to scrub the wall with vigor.
That sight caused Hikaru to widen his eyes.
Koremitsu too had originally assumed that Yū would have a towel draped over her, shivering and shriveling in a corner of the room, or that she had fainted from the shock. He was taken aback by Yū’s actions.
However, this did not mean that such a dastardly act had never happened.
“Absolutely unforgivable.”
Koremitsu clenched his fists firmly, his temples tightened. While he murmured and unleashed his rage, Yū looked up at him tentatively.
Koremitsu knelt down in front of her, and the latter was taken aback, her body shivering.
“Yū! Do you know who did this?”
“…I don’t.”
She shook her head.
“Either way, I’m going to find him and beat him up. I’ll be with you always, Yū, I’ll protect you.”
I definitely won’t allow her to do such a despicable thing again. I’ll protect Yū!
The blood flowing in his body was pumped due to his rage and determination, his muscles tensed, and the core of his head was buzzing.
What Poppy! I don’t care what your orders are!
I don’t care what kind of execution it is! There’s no way I’ll do that! I’ll definitely smash the head of that sender in, and force him to grovel and apologize to Yū!
While Koremitsu was rampaging due to his rage, Yū looked up at him with her fleeting eyes.
Her eyes fluttered the moment she heard the word ‘protect’, and though her lips twitched, she did not say anything.
◇
◇ ◇
After that, Yū was endangered all the time.
Every day, Koremitsu would receive messages from the Poppy.

“Koremitsu Akagi shall execute Yū Kanai in the name of the Poppy by stoning.”

Koremitsu went off sprinting after seeing such a message, and saw that Yū

had a stone thrown at her head as she was walking through a crowd, leaving a small wound on her.
The methods of execution varied, including ‘burial’, ‘stabbing’, ‘poison’.
What happened thereafter was that events befell upon her, like dirt falling from a veranda, hurt by a thumbtack on the corridor, and mixing salt in the sugar pot.
These were not threatening situations; they were more akin to childish pranks.
However, Koremitsu clenched his fists quite a few times, terrified that the little things around him could be used for such things, and worried of Yū’s mental stress as she endured all this.
He said he wanted to protect Yū, but he never did.
He was peeved, and remorseful. Whenever the prophecies of the Poppy was carried out, his head began to sear.
If anything was to happen to Yū when I’m at school. Once he thought about this, he was unable to calm down and attend classes. He did not attend school for the past 3 days.
When he woke up in the morning, he rushed off to the hospital where Yū was at. While Yū went to talk with the old man from Australia, he waited quietly in the room.
When Yū returned, he was tense and wary. Whenever she went, he would scowl and follow.
But even so, she got hit by a stone.
And when Koremitsu went back at night, it appeared that Yū went out again.
This was a seed of discord between them.
“I told you to tell me when you want to go out, right? Isn’t it dangerous to go out alone?”
“There’s a car fetching me…so…I’m fine here.”
“Where were you at every night?”
“I was requested…to be a volunteer.”
“Volunteer?”
“I was to go visit an old man living alone…give him flowers, chat with him or something.”
“Why do you have to do that in the night? Can’t you do it in the day?”
“I need…to take care of the other old men in the day…so.”
“You didn’t refuse?”
“…It’s someone who often helped me out, and he asked me…to take care of the old man, so I wanted to do my best…to take care of him…”
“What kind of person is that acquaintance like?”
“…That’s..”
“What’s his name? What does he do? How old is he?”
“…I still can’t say.”
Once the conversations end up like this, Yū would typically avert her eyes and not say anything.

Why could she not mention the name of the one taking care of her?
Did she really become a volunteer at night?
Yū's attitude and voice were so rigid, Koremitsu was increasingly suspicious that she was lying.
Yū lowered her eyebrows awkwardly, and as she did, Koremitsu was left breathless by the anxiety that came.
The Poppy was again placed in the room.
There was a bundle of flowers placed on the table, and another by the basin in the kitchen, with plenty of thin, crimson petals scattered all over the carpet.
They were startling, vibrant and ribald flowers, the flowers with the name of the beloved consort of the Conqueror, smiling with a sweet chuckle. This caused Koremitsu's gut to wince.
"You received these flowers again? Looks like you like them."
"Y-yes. They're…really pretty."
However, these flowers don't match you at all, Yū. They're flaunting, raunchy,. My heart just sickens whenever I see them. I hate them.
Koremitsu was unable to say those words, and he swallowed them.
When Yū remained shut in her apartment, unwilling to head out, the time Koremitsu spent with her together was like a recess at the bottom of the sea, one filled with peace.
But at this point, whenever he tried to talk to Yū, he could only sense that she was hiding something, and he felt restless.
Koremitsu was worried about Yū, and wanted to protect her. For some reason, it appeared that she was very defenseless herself, and even after asking why she wouldn't give up on her volunteer work, she would simply avert the topic or not talk at all, and this caused Koremitsu much vexation.
Hikaru watched Koremitsu frown all day long, and looked worried as he said,
"If you are being so tense at everything, you will be the first to fall. Yū is no longer the same as the one who kept herself locked in that apartment. She will think for herself and take action, even if you do remain with her at all times."
He tried to appease Koremitsu, having considered the latter's feelings.
Koremitsu realized that he was being petty now that he had this pointed out.
Once he noticed it, his head sizzled, but if he were to go out, and Yū was to be hurt before he came back."
"That's why I said to stay here already, didn't I!"
He gave Yū such a chiding tone.
Koremitsu did not take the time to calm down, and as he remained anxious, Yū stared at him in an apologetic manner, her smile gradually faded.
And so, on the sunset after Koremitsu refused to attend school for the 4th time.
She stared at him in a tragic manner,

“Please…just go to school. I feel pained…to be with you, Mr. Akagi.”

It was truly a plea.
Her eyebrows were lowered, her eyes damp, her lips quivered as she hushed her voice. All those caused Koremitsu to be stupefied.
Yū herself should have known that these words would hurt Koremitsu, but it was really a state where Koremitsu’s existence was causing her to suffer, and she was suffering so much she had to say it. It was as if a part of her body was being ripped away from her.
Hikaru too gave Koremitsu an anguished look.
“I…”
A slurred voice slipped between his lips.
He did not have any intention of causing her to suffer. He was simply worried about her—
But no matter what he said, it would merely cause more moisture in Yū’s eyes, and her to feel more anguished.
His hands clenched rigidly, he gritted his teeth, and remained silent.
“I understand…if there’s anything, call me.”
He said, and left the room.
◇
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“You had a quarrel with Mr. Akagi, did you not?’
Yū’s chest was practically ripped by a thousand blades as she watched Koremitsu leave, and a rich, sweet voice entered her ears.
The washroom door opened, and standing there was a bespectacled, tender looking boy with slender shoulders.
“…Mr. Kazuaki.”
“Sorry. It was my fault.”
He approached Yū with elegant steps, watching her face with a worried look.
He bore no similarities to Hikaru in any way other than the rich sweet voice, but the tenderness and words caused her to be reminded of Hikaru.
“No…it is not your fault.”
She shook her head silently.
He however looked at her worriedly. Their faces were close, but her heart did not flutter as it did when she was with Koremitsu, or perhaps it was because Kazuaki gave a genial atmosphere, and that she knew that Kazuaki was a fine gentleman.
She first met Kazuaki, Hikaru’s older brother, in Australia.
He was an acquaintance who often visited the care center where Yū did her volunteer work.
“You are Yū Kanai, right? I heard that you are on good terms with Hikaru, no? I am his older brother. Woah, this is quite a coincidence.”
He came to chat with her happily.

The rich, sweet voice was just as when she spoke to Hikaru, and this caused her to immediately let her guard down. If she had closed her eyes, Kazuaki's voice would have sounded just like Hikaru's.
"Hikaru and I are agnate brothers. My mother is a very proud person, and it appeared that she would not forgive father for secretly letting Hikaru be born.
When father decided to let Hikaru enter the household, she angrily sent me to another place to stay at, so I hardly had the chance to talk with him. I did hear that Hikaru is very popular amongst the girls, and also about you. If possible, do you mind if you talk about Hikaru with you? I really wanted to get along with him, actually."
As he said that, there was some scene of loneliness appearing in his eyes, and her heart gripped as she felt the impulse to comfort him. Yū recalled the memories she had with Hikaru, and talked about them. Kazuaki narrowed his eyes happily, sometimes envious, sometimes forlorn as he smiled.
"…I see. You already had your promise with Hikaru fulfilled. That is wonderful. That…can never happen for me now."
Kazuaki's attitude, tone and expression had been gentlemanly the entire time, and never did coerce Yū into doing anything. He always treated her, younger than him, with an overly humble attitude.
"Yū, perhaps you can take care of Mr. Collins, no? He will be able to visit his son in Japan."
And thus, Yū's return to Japan was encompassed in the planning.
Kazuaki too remained gentle in the plane. When Yū showed a gloomy look.
"What is the matter? Is there something you have to worry about?"
He asked with the tone of a close family member.
Yū shook her head.
"…Perhaps Mr. Akagi doesn't like me as how I am right now…"
She revealed what she had been secretly thinking.
"What are you say now, Yū? Are you not a fine woman now? Surely Mr. Akagi will fall for you again."
Kazuaki said.
"But…Mr. Akagi…wouldn't let go of me…because I was so fragile back then, that I couldn't do things by myself…that's why he worked hard, and brought me to the outside world…he just held my hand because I…was unsteady…I felt like I was about to fall…If I'm able to walk on my own, surely Mr. Akagi…doesn't need me anymore…I guess…"
"Then, when you do meet Mr. Akagi, perhaps you can try again. Will Mr. Akagi again hold your hand when you are cheerful and able to smile? Surely you will understand that you are just worrying too much."
The conclusion was made with that voice filled with clarity, just like an encouragement from Hikaru, causing her heavy heart to relax slightly.
"But even so, you really do like him, Yū. I really wish that Mr. Akagi would be able to hear your words, Yū. What will you do if I say that our

conversation was recorded?”
“Eh…th-that’s.”
“Ahaha. That was a lie. Were you shocked?”
“Y-yes.”
“That is how it works. You were shocked, and then all your worry suddenly vanished, no?”
He noted tenderly to Yū as the latter widened her eyes, and then,
“Hey, Yū. I suppose it is better not to mention about me to Mr. Akagi.”
He said with a steady voice.
“It is not a good thing to hear that one’s girlfriend is riding a plane with another boy, and staying in an apartment arranged by him. Surely he will be jealous.”
Girlfriend—now that this term is used, am I Mr. Akagi’s girlfriend? Her face blushed as she thought of this, *Mr. Kazuaki is Hikaru’s older brother. Will Mr. Akagi be jealous?* Though she wondered, she never had any experience of dating a boy, and never had proper conversations with boys other than Hikaru, so she did not know.
However, one could tell from Kazuaki’s tender eyes that those words were not a lie, so she did as he said. It was impossible for this gentle, smiling Kazuaki to actually do anything diabolic.
“Actually, I was misunderstood by Mr. Akagi.”
It was when they were arriving at Japan that he mentioned it.
Back then, it was not anything particularly poignant.
“It seemed my mother did something terrible to Hikaru’s mother…Mr. Akagi must have thought I did the same thing to Hikaru. He really glared at me the first time we met.”
Kazuaki chuckled.
So Yū made a promise.
“I’ll introduce you to Mr. Akagi, Mr. Kazuaki. I will tell him that you are a kind person.”
“I will be glad to. Can you do that? Please keep it a secret, and then slowly reveal it later.”
As Kazuaki beamed and requested Yū of this, the latter smiled and answered,
“Yes.”
When exactly could she talk about Kazuaki to Koremitsu. It would be great if Koremitsu would clear his misunderstanding of Kazuaki and get along. Yū was really looking forward to it.
But at this point,
“I am sorry…Yū. I suppose Mr. Akagi’s misunderstanding was a lot more serious than what I told you on the plane.”
He first began to say these words on the ward room sofa, the day when Yū accidentally got scalded brewing tea.
“I really do like it that Aoi was Hikaru’s fiancee. I really did like her ever since I was young, but because I knew Aoi liked Hikaru, I hid my feelings

for her and treated her like an older brother. Hikaru however died, and I could not leave Aoi as she was…I really hoped that she would be better, so I got her to a resort. Aoi suddenly felt unwell, and it just so happened that Mr. Akagi, worried that I would do anything bad to her, came over, and deemed me to be a pervert who did something terrible to Aoi. I even got hit by him."
Clouds appeared in Kazuaki's eyes.
"The swelling remained for quite a while…and after that, he would not listen to my explanation at all. He would simply hiss at me 'you perverted scoundrel' 'you wanna get beaten!?' whenever he saw my face, even raising his fist at me. Mr. Akagi has a strong sense of justice. It was my fault for doing something that roused his misunderstanding…it really is troublesome to be hated by Hikaru's close friend like that."
Kazuaki looked forlorn as he placed his fists on his knees and remained silent; Yū felt pity for him.
"Actually, I already knew that Mr. Akagi does like you, Yū. Perhaps you will be able to quell the misunderstanding Mr. Akagi had, or so I hoped. It really does seem that I am making use of you. I really do apologize."
I lowered his head deeply, and Yū held his hand.
"Please don't apologize…I don't think…I'm being made use of. It is thanks to you that I am able to return to Japan and meet Mr. Akagi again…I'm… really grateful to you….so, I-I'll do my best…to make sure you two get along…"
Surely Mr. Akagi will understand that Mr. Kazuaki is such an honest, kind person.
No, I hope he will
She wanted to clear Koremitsu's understanding by talking about him, little by little.
And so, Kazuaki lifted his face, and beamed graciously.
Then, he continued with that clear voice akin to Hikaru's,
"There are lots of people around me who wish to harm me, so I absolutely cannot let my guard. It is for my own safety, but I do find it tragic that I have to continue living on while keeping my guard up…but you are my ally, no, Yū? I shall believe in your words then."
He concluded, seemingly delighted with this. Yū's heart too calme d down.
After that, whenever Koremitsu visited over and over again, her heart was practically about to stop, and Kazuaki,
"Now is still not the time to meet him. If he tis to see us together in the room, it will be just as what happened with Aoi. Mr Akagi will definitely beat me up without hearing my explanation."
He was angsty, and hid at the basin.
Koremitsu's eyes were bloodshot as he appeared, his eyebrows frowning as he gave a heinous glare. If the incident about Kazuaki was to be revealed, it appeared that the latter would be beaten to death. Yū's heart was about to break apart.

She heard some sounds from the basin, and was really terrified as she turned her head there.
When Koremitsu said that he wanted to use the washroom,
“N-no!”
Yū yelled without thinking,
“E-erm, I’ll go get a wet towel…please…wait here, Mr. Akagi…do-don’t move. And…no peeping.”
She cautiously opened the door to prevent Koremitsu from looking inside, and Kazuaki was seated in the bathtub, cupping his knees.
“Does Mr Akagi know that we know each other?”
“Erm…I suppose not.”
Perhaps he sensed something however.
And maybe he would suddenly barge in.
Once she began to doubt, she got increasingly tense, almost groggy. Thus, she told him that she had something going on, hoping that he would return back.
That night, she received the message from Koremitsu, **“Sorry for visiting you so suddenly.”** , and the guilt pricked her body, so she replied with **” I, too, apologize for what happened”** .
She wanted to explain Kazuaki to Koremitsu.
Having decided that, what immediately happened was the black umbrella dangled from the rope. Back then, she red umbrella dripping black water appeared in her sights, and she knelt in the mud in the garden, looking for the umbrella—she was reminded of the clapping of the rain, and the touch of the muddy ground; as a result, her body was frozen.
She barely managed to regain her consciousness, shivering as she scrubbed the wall and bed, the image of the damaged umbrella swirling in her mind.
If Koremitsu had not been around, perhaps she would not have been able to shake off those fears.
However, Koremitsu said that he surely not never forgive the person who did such a thing, and would definitely beat him up. The moment he swore to protect Yū, the latter felt a tinge of sadness in her terrified, confused heart.
Koremitsu said ‘I’ll protect you’, but why did she feel so sad? Back then, she did not understand.
After that, little things happened every day, and Koremitsu stopped attending school to remain with her. While he kept worrying for her, agony struck her.
Whether it was the umbrella incident, the dirt that fell from the veranda, or the salt mixed in the sugar pot, Kazuaki said with a worried look.
“I guess it is definitely my fault here, Yū. Surely you were thought to be my lover.”
That is wy you were troubled like this. Kazuaki said, appearing to have an idea.
“I guess it is better for you to return to Australia. I cannot allow you to suffer any more danger.”

Kazuaki stubbornly insisted, Yū answered, saying that she wanted to stay in Japan until that day.
If she was to return at this point, all her efforts for Koremitsu and Kazuaki would be wasted.
And surely she would be left with regrets.
“Really?”
“Yes.”
Though she said so, Yū was frustrated that Koremitsu wanted to protect her so much, and that she had to explain why she was being targeted.
If she were to talk about it, she would have to explain about Kazuaki.
Koremitsu might feel enraged because Kazuaki caused Yū much danger, and he would feel increasingly vengeful.
Having thought about that, she was unable to say anything.
This guilt, coupled with the agony that struck her from time to time, kept her breathless all time.
Koremitsu’s eyes too got increasingly savage because of Yū.
Yū really was unable to endure this, and felt apologetic, depressed.
“Please…just go to school. I feel pained…to be with you, Mr. Akagi.”
She pleaded Koremitsu,

(I’m sorry…Mr Akagi.)

Yū whispered this, and Kazuaki gave her an apologetic look.
It was something Yū decided for herself, and she certainly could not let Kazuaki feel that it was something he had to bear responsibility for. Having thought that, she did her best to lift her head and smile,
“I will…contact Mr Akagi…later on…more importantly, where are we going today…?”
“Forget about the volunteer work today. You should take a rest.”
“No. I guess I’ll be relaxed…when I go out to talk…”
Kazuaki’s requested for her to deliver flowers to old people living alone. The adorable, radiant crimson flowers were called Poppies. He told her that.
It is a beautiful color that would cheer a soul, Kazuaki said with a cheerful look, and Yū too felt the same.
“Yes, surely he will feel this way.”
Kazuaki beamed, the eyes behind his glasses narrowed. It was such a genial, serene, sweet, sweet smile—
“Now then, I shall prepare a bouquet…one much larger than usual…”
◇
◇ ◇
Love will make anyone pretty. However, that love contorts my face, making it hideous. It threw a my heart a pungent, filthy mud.
The girl in front of you is more wretched than me. Why are you not smiling at me, but at her?

Why must you reach out to that wretched flower, caress her face and scent upon her aroma? Your promise with me was never fulfilled. Why must you swear an eternal swore with that girl, with your fingers intertwined?
The fact cringes, the lips contorts, and the eyelids continue to shiver.
I cannot allow myself to be ugly. I cannot be as wretched as them. I cannot allow myself to be as filthy as those women.
However, the contorted face, the creaking body, and the ripped bleeding heart happened. The bright red blood became a crimson flower, swaying gently, drawing me in.
Stop.
If I become ugly, mother will lash out at me. I will be harshly hit on the hand.
But if I am to pretend. Yes, if I am to just do that, I will be someone else when I play pretend.
The crimson one-piece dress that really suits mother's dance seem to allure me, forcing me to put it on.
I felt that I was not myself.
Ever since that day, I began to play a game.
I imagined—trying to be someone else. I am loved, and hated, releasing my innter heart like a torrent, free, bored, and I accepted it all, becoming a crimson woman.
I became Rokujō.
Having obtained that power, I began to change amidst the swaying crimson flowers, becoming his Cherry Blossom, his Lily, his Pansy, his Camellia, his Orchid, and his beloved—Wisteria.
Ah, such a sweet, wondrous time.

The ones preventing this cannot be forgiven.
In the name of the crimson flower, 'I' command.
To dig out the wretches, hang them, and let them kill each other
◇
◇ ◇
After dinner, Koremitsu locked himself in the room, brooding.
"Is my desire to protect Yū causing her trouble? Is that why she lost her smile?"
He noticed that he was the one who caused Yū that anguished look.
But Koremitsu firmly believed that if he was to keep preventing her from getting hurt, surely she would again smile like how she did that day. He wanted to protect Yū for that—and ended up hurting her more.
Hikaru carefully warned,
"Koremitsu, your desire to protect her is stronger than any ordinary person. This time, Yū is hurt because of your name, so I do understand that you cannot allow yourself not to do anything. It is not a bad thing to take a step back and calm down, however. I feel this is Yū's way of telling you to calm down."

His words were so tender, so calm and fair, and they entered Koremitsu's heart effortlessly. However, they were shrill.
Koremitsu sat on the tatami with his legs crossed, his hands on his forehead as he scowled. In the meantime, Hikaru whispered with melancholy,
"I too…only cared about my own feelings. Perhaps I never noticed some things that were important…"
The tender, effeminate sidelong face gloomed at this moment.
Perhaps he thought of Fujino.
The one most beloved person to Hikaru in this world, whom he could never embrace with.
Even he, who spent much time with many girls, would be perplexed, filled with regrets.
The more he wanted to cherish, hope and love, the more intense that trepidation got.
Surely there were many days where he buried his head and grimaced.
(Is that guy talking about the one he liked…?)
Koremitsu himself was yet at the point where he could get an answer.
The *fusuma* slid open, and this time, he spotted the face of Shioriko, now dressed in pajamas.
"…Big brother Koremitsu, can we sleep together?"
Shioriko had been lackluster recently, seemingly thinking of something complicated alone.
"Did anything happen?"
"…No."
Even thought Koremitsu asked her, she never replied.
"I just…want to sleep together."
She whispered, and her shoulders dropped as she remained silent.
While Shioriko remained as she was, Hikaru looked at her worriedly, and Koremitsu too found himself very pitiful.
"Okay, come here."
He answered curtly.
If Shioriko wished for it, they would sleep together. She would be able to calm down, and he would be able to get closer to the answer.
She hugged her pillow, approaching him tentatively. Koremitsu stood up and laid out the blanket. It was a little too early for the high school boy Koremitsu to sleep, but the moment he laid on the futon, Shioriko snuck in.
Her hair gave off the scent of shampoo from a while back, and her skin gave a milky scent. She buried her little face firmly into his chest, and closed her eyes. The room was silent, and the wind was howling furiously outside the window.
Was Shioriko already asleep, or that she could not sleep even though she had her eyes close? Even now, perhaps that little heart of hers was still in agony…
He could see a little curl of hair in his sights. It was practically a fit into his chest, the adorable sight causing his gut to wince again.

(Hey, Shiiko…if I’m to force you to say what’s troubling you when I want to take care of you…will you be hurt and refuse me…)
Hikaru, unable to sleep, sat with a knee tucked by the windowsill, watching Koremitsu and Shioriko with his anguished, jaded eyes

Chapter 4

The next morning, after four days of absence, Koremitsu attended school.
“Mr. Akagi, you caught a cold?”
His classmate Yoshida asked while they were at the corridor.
“Eh? Ah, yeah.”
It appeared he missed classes because he was assumed to be ill. Surely, it was much different from when he took a little break, and ended up rumored to be off for a country delinquent tour.
“If you don’t mind, I can lend you my notes during the break.”
After hearing that, Koremitsu was touched.
He entered the classroom, and saw Honoka at her seat, fiddling with her phone with a terrifying face. She was frowning, pouting, staring at it intently.
“Yo…”
She was taken aback by Koremitsu’s sudden greeting, and hurriedly hid her phone, turned her face aside, and said,
“M-morning.”
And then, she continued to fiddle with her phone again.
(What’s with her? She’s looking flustered after seeing me.)
Just like the expression she showed at the hospital Yū was staying at…
Just when Koremitsu was starting to be concerned about Honoka’s attitude, his cellphone suddenly vibrated.
His face immediately stiffened, but the sender was Michiru.
(Huh?)
Koremitsu lifted his head, and spotted Michiru holding a cellphone, staring at Koremitsu at his seat.
(Why must you send a message? Can’t you just come over directly?)
He opened the message.
“Please come to the roof during the break. Don’t let Hono know about it.”
“I suppose it is not a love confession.”
Hikaru too spoke grimly as he watched the stern expression on Michiru’s face.

During the break after the first period.
Koremitsu went to the roof, and Michiru was already there.
The sky before Winter was clear, and the blustery gales caused one to shiver due to the cold.
Koremitsu slowly approached Michiru, and the latter went straight to the point, worried about the lack of time,

“Shiiko came to our school yesterday. I told her that you were on leave, and she was shocked. You didn’t inform your family members that you weren’t attending school, Mr. Akagi?”
“Well, yeah.”
Koremitsu answered, feeling startled,
(Shiiko actually came to school?)
Koremitsu and Hikaru stared at each other.
(Did Shiiko ask me to sleep with her because of this? Why didn’t she ask me why I skipped school? What was so urgent that she had to come to our school?)
“You’re going to talk about Shiiko, right?”
“There’s still more…”
Michiru’s words remained vague, her expression gloomy.
“I also wanted to talk to you about Hono, Mr. Akagi. She has been acting strange recently.”
“Strange?”
Michiru lifted her head, and gave Koremitsu a serious stare,
“Hono had been either late for school or taking early leave when you were on leave, Mr. Akagi—this had never happened before, and when I asked her, she merely said that something serious happened to a relative. She was fiddling with her phone at school, doing something, and sometimes, she never noticed that I was trying to talk to her.”
“Isn’t she always like that…?”
Honoka would spend most of the time playing with her phone in class. One could say that it would be strange for Honoka not to be on her phone.
“That’s what you assume when you don’t pay attention to her carefully, Mr. Akagi. Hono looked really scary when she stared at the phone. Her eyes were red, and her lips were purple.”
Doesn’t she always have that fierce look… Koremitsu wondered, but he was still curious as to Honoka’s earlier reaction. Also, she was acting as ‘strange’
as what Michiru said when they met in the hospital.
While Koremitsu remained silent and pondered, Michiru looked hapless as she explained.
“Did Hono do something to Miss Kanai…?”
“What do you mean?”
Koremitsu raised his eyebrows, scaring Michiru enough to shrivel. Hikaru too casted a harsh stare at her,
“Y-you can’t mention this to anyone else, and not to Hono, okay? She definitely won’t want you to know about this. She usually won’t do such a thing, so you must keep this a secret between us.”
Michiru kept asking for an assurance, and whispered,
“A-a while back, I was using her phone, and I so happened to see what was inside…there’s a folder titled ‘Kanai’ inside, with a lot of Miss Kanai’s photos in there.”

“!”
Koremitsu gasped.
Hikaru too looked thunderstruck.
“Hono has been acting strange ever since you and Miss Kanai were reunited.
I feel that Hono won’t do a bad thing, but I’m imagining bad things out of this.”
“I’ll go ask Shikibu…”
Koremitsu hissed.
“Eh!?”
Michiru raised her voice in surprise.
“Wa-wait, Mr. Akagi…! I told you not to tell Hono—I said it’s to be kept a secret between us—wait, Mr. Akagi!”
Michiru scampered after Koremitsu, the latter storming towards the stairwell door.
“Koremitsu, I do not think it is wise to interrogate directly.”
“I know.”
Koremitsu answered, his eyes looking forward.
Once he got back to the classroom, he spotted Honoka staring at the cellphone with bloodshot eyes. The thin chain bracelet attached to the wrist swayed gently.
“Shikibu.”
Honoka was startled, and hid the phone under the table before turning towards Koremitsu.
“We met in the hospital, right?”
“…!”
Honoka was shocked.
“We did, once.”
She raised her voice, answering shrilly.
“Is there a problem?”
“Who’s the relative there?”
“Eh?”
“What kind of relative?”
“Wh-what’s with—”
Honoka was flabbergasted.
“Your grandpa? Uncle? Or cousin?”
“Wh-wh-wh-wh-why are you asking these now?”
Koremitsu stared at Honoka, restraining himself as he hissed,
“Nothing. I just want to know what were you doing at that place.”
“!”
Honoka gasped.
“Answer me, Shikibu.”
Honoka bit her lips as she stared back, her eyes looking lost. Just when she was about to weep in her weakness, she suddenly raised her eyebrows, yelling,

“It’s my great-great grandpa!”
She grabbed the phone, got up, and ran out of the classroom.
“Ah, Hono!”
Michiru, returning from the roof, gave chase after Honoka.
Koremitsu slumped into his seat, folded his arms, and gritted hard.
“Tch, your great-great grandpa’s still alive!?”
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Honoka left Michiru aside while the latter kept inquiring into what she said to Koremitsu, “Sorry, got to use to the washroom”, and she proceeded to the cubicle.
(What do I do now!? Akagi will definitely realize it! He’s definitely suspecting me now!)
She sat on the lid of the toilet bowl, her hands grabbing the phone firmly as she murmured.

—Answer me.

She recalled Koremitsu’s furious glare when she was interrogated, and felt her gut wince. Koremitsu already knew that she was not at the hospital to visit a relative.
It was a grave misfortune for Honoka to actually meet him.
(How can I possibly say that I was at the hospital to investigate the message stating that Miss Kanai was dealing with drugs!?)

—She returned back to sell off the drugs imported from overseas.

Honoka initially did not believe in this suspense drama-like turn of events. How could that gullible Yū actually be so bold and proactive?
Thus, Honoka tried to convince herself that this was some harmless rumor, and secretly investigated Yū.
She did not expect to see Yū walk out of the room with crimson flowers in her hands. The bouquet of flowers she held was the Poppy, the codename in the message. Yū also was not alone.
There was also a lanky, bespectacled youth dressed in a suit.
He looked frail and unreliable, but he was dressed in quite the pompous clothing. He was also abnormally close to Yū, and the latter did not seem wary of him.
(I think I saw that man before…)
She tried to recall who he was, but was unable to remember when exactly did she see that plain face.
All she knew that he was intimate enough to spend a long time with Yū in the same room, and that caused her mood to worsen.

She recalled the message stating that Yū Kanai betrayed Koremitsu Akagi and had an illicit relationship with other men; her imagination took a turn for the worst.
(Did Miss Kanai betray Akagi to date that guy?)
Honoka too did her investigation on the drugs based on the message.
The address and codename included in the address immediately appeared in front of her.
The seller was the ‘Consort Yu’, the codename was the crimson Poppy flowers.
Honok did a site search regarding eyewitness reports on the ‘Consort Yu’, and the appearances and attire matched that of Yū who was holding crimson flowers.
She also once took a taxi to tail Yū. The latter’s car stopped in front of a dated residence some distance away from the residential block, and Yū walked over with bouquet in hand, only reappearing two hours later.
Yū did not have those flowers in her hand when she left.
Because of that, Honoka handed all of her part-time work salary earned from street sample distribution to the taxi driver.
If one was to open the ‘Kanai’ folder in Honoka’s phone, one would be able to discover a vast amount of photos taken over the past few days.
Yū holding the crimson flowers.
Yū riding a car with the bespectacled youth.
Yū smiling as the youth cupped her shoulder.
(What am I doing actually!?)
How despicable was she to stalk her love rival and secretly take photos of her with another boy?
She peeked into another person’s private life, and left a large amount of evidence.
(But if Miss Kanai’s really the ‘Poppy’, the drug dealer…I can’t leave her alone.)
The bell chimed, and silence befall the toilet .
Michiru probably gave up and returned to the classroom.
Honoka remained seated on the toilet bowl, the cellphone again vibrating in her hand, and an unread message appeared.
Feeling that there was no turning back, she opened it.
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More than 10 minutes had elapsed by the time Honoka returned to the classroom.
She excused herself to the teacher, explaining that she felt unwell, and sat down beside Koremitsu.
In fact, she was looking pale. The teacher even told her worriedly, “You may head to the infirmary”.
“I’m fine.”

Honoka whispered,. Michiru was at her seat, and she turned to Honoka with an anguished face.
Koremitsu too was feeling under the weather, his gut aching.
After that, Honoka ran out of the classroom during the breaks, and only came back right when classes were about to begin.
Clearly, she was trying to avoid Koremitsu and Michiru.
“I gave Hono a message, but she never replied”
Michiru noted dejectedly.

During noon break, Hikaru quizzed Koremitsu with a grim look.
“Do you think Miss Shikibu did something bad to Yū?”
“She’s not that kind of person.”
Koremitsu answered.
The purple Heliotrope would never be so conniving; it would face any situation head on, and fight it. If the enemy was disadvantaged, it would reached its hand out to help. That was the kind of person she was.
“You really do trust Miss Shikibu, Koremitsu.”
Hikaru answered gently.
Feeling bashful, Koremitsu answered.
“Yeah, if there’s only one person in the entire school I’ll choose to trust, that’ll be her. It’s that kind of trust.”
Till this point, Honoka helped out Koremitsu so many times as an earnest Heliotrope with her sincere actions.
He thought of the pouting face staring at him, the earnest busybody of a classmate…
“So, between me and Miss Shikibu, who do you trust?”
“Shikibu. You’re hiding too much stuff, and you’ll bluff me with those nonchalant faces.”
“Now that hurts.”
Hikaru showed a hapless face, and chuckled,
“You are the one I trust most in this world, Koremitsu. Since you believe in Miss Shikibu, I shall believe in her too. I do believe she is not one to look for trouble, and even if she did, there has to be a reason.”
“Yeah…”
That was the issue.
A groan escaped from Koremitsu’s sealed lips.
“It’ll be great if Shikibu isn’t caught in some dangerous matter.”
He really hoped she was not bullied like Yū.
Surely the feisty Honoka would never be cowed, and would search for the culprit alone. However, he had yet to understand why she had so many photos of Yū, why she appeared at the hospital, and what was with this entire chain of events…
“I can be certain however that she has reasons for not saying this to you.”
“Damn it. How am I supposed to make her speak? She’s tougher to deal with than Yū.”

“Perhaps you can try embracing her and tell her ‘I’m worried about you’ with an anguished voice. I suppose however that at the end of it all, Miss Shikibu will simply remain silent, saying ‘I still can’t tell you’.”
While Koremitsu was blushing over Hikaru’s preposition, speechless.
Hiina appeared on the rooftop,
“It’s been a while.”
With a boyish, mischievous face, she approached Koremitsu, her greeting lively as ever.
“You were on leave for so long, I thought you eloped with Miss Kanai.”
(What’s with that out of a sudden?)
Before Koremitsu could reply, Hiina suddenly looked grim,
“But it is great that you are here. Everyone has been acting strange when you weren’t around, Mr. Akagi.”

—She has been acting strange recently.

Michiru’s voice suddenly reconciled with Hiina’s words.
Was she referring to the one being strange all over school?
Before Koremitsu got himself preoccupied with Yū however, Asai, Aoi and Tsuyako were already acting strange…
“The Matriarch Asa and Her Highness Aoi have been glaring at each other with frosty eyes, remaining silent. Nobody around them dared to talk.”
That was just as what he saw before.
(Was it like that afterwards?)
Hikaru too inadvertently frowned.
“The Moon Matriarch had all kinds of spider paintings and toys into her clubroom every day; she has been acting cheerful, but she must be feeling pressurized within, I guess.”
“Spider!?”
“That is terrible! Tsuyako is really terrified of spiders!”
Tsuyako’s family, the Udates, worshipped a woman who transformed into a spider and ate her husband and the mistress. She was always afraid of that myth.
Koremitsu remembered how she would pale whenever she saw a spider, no matter how small it was. Surely she would not be able to last if she was to see them every day.
“Why’s this happening?”
“Some chain message was spread around saying that she’s scared of spiders.”
Hiina showed her phone to Koremitsu.
Red words were lined on the phone.

“Tsuyako Udate shall be judged in the name of the Poppy. All that resist fate shall have calamity wrought upon them.”

The colloid, corroded feeling lingered in Koremitsu's stomach.
The Poppy's judgment was not limited simply to Yū!
While Koremitsu's attention was focused on Yū, the entire school was caught in the dominion of the Poppy.
(Damn it!)
The strong sense of fury boiled in his heart.
Hiina spoke with a calm tone.
"Back then, it seemed a vengeful spirit lingered around in school. No, even now, it's—"
"A vengeful spirit…"
There exist a vengeful spirit—Asai did mention this before. The fear created by the student nobles in the sealed room was coupled with their guessing, causing it to actually exist.
Perhaps the students who threw the spider toys into the Japanese Dance clubroom were afflicted by the spirit.
"How stupid."
But that was the case.
Hiina gave Koremitsu an expectant look.
"It is you who dispelled the rumors of Miss Kanai's spirit reviving, so maybe this time, you can…"
At this moment, Hiina's cellphone chimed. Once she had a look at it, she became tense.
"It looks like the Matriarch Asa and Her Highness Aoi have an argument. Let's go."
"Asa and Miss Aoi!?"
"Hey, Oumi! What's with that!?"
Koremitsu yelled as he ran alongside her.
"As I said, it appears that they're having a go on the corridor!"
"Perhaps Asa and Miss Aoi are fighting each other, pulling each other's hair, and punching each other!?"
(That's impossible!!)
If that was to happen, the only explanation would be that they were possessed by some spirit."
Huffing and puffing, Koremitsu ran to the second level corridor.
"Over there!"
Hiina pointed at a group of people; arguments could be heard from there.
"That is enough already. I know that you are the one who placed the chopper from the home economics room in my drawer, Aoi."
"I do not know about that. Did you not put a pin holder from the floral arrangement club in my shoe locker, Asa?"
"Enough with the irrational assumptions. You are actually able to remain so calm after getting so many dress pins from the dressing room and putting them in my locker."

“You are the shameless one here, Asa. You soaked my gym clothes in water, threw it in front of the arts room, and even revealed the side with my name on it.”
“Did you also not trim my skirt, put it on a hanger, and left it on the student council office door while I was having PE? Even writing a nameplate over it?”
“I did not!”
The voices clearly were from Asai and Aoi, but the arguments were such that Koremitsu doubted his ears many times.
Hikaru too gulped and widened his eyes from time to time.
“Enough already, you two! How undignified can you be!”
“Be quiet, Big Brother Shungo!”
“Mr. Tōjō, do go bake some milk-flavored Chiffon cake for her.”
“Do not look down on milk-flavor. Do you think you are amazing for drinking sugarless coffee?”
“Did I say that?”
“You said it, in the message!”
“I never did send any message. Did you not send a few weird ones yourself?”
“How can I possibly be sending any to you when we are on harsh terms!”
Koremitsu broke through the crowd, and poked in.
Asai and Aoi were not ‘fighting’ each other, but their heads were almost hitting each other as they glared. Tōjō, on the other side, was giving a wry face.
“Hey, give it a rest already!”
Koremitsu shouted, and the duo turned to him in unison, their faces blushing.
“Mr. Akagi…”
“…Uu.”
Their faces were beetroot as they stared at him with frozen looked. The bell indicating the end of noon break rang, and they awkwardly turned their faces aside, returning to their classrooms.
“Why did they stop when Akagi suddenly shouted…they would not listen to me…”
Tōjō muttered, looking extremely incredulous.
The students that were flocked together too dispersed. Everyone was talking about what just happened, and the murmurs spread around the corridor like unnerving vengeful spirits. Koremitsu looked on grimly.
Hiina, standing beside Koremitsu, gave a wise, boyish stare,
“The Matriarch Asa and Her Highness Aoi said that they received messages, no? As for whether it is that ‘Poppy’s work, I do have some interesting rumors that I can look into.”
“What rumors?”
“Give me a day. I’ll report to you.”

Hiina cheerfully noted, looked over at the dejected Tōjō with a chortle, and left.

◇

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It was the 5th period break.

Koremitsu scowled as he watched Honoka scamper out of the classroom, and walked towards Tsuyako's classroom.

'You finally came to school."

Tsuyako appeared delighted once she spotted Koremitsu, beaming.

"Oh? What is with that grim look? Ah, I heard that Miss Asai and Miss Aoi just had a spar with chopper and pinholder, Miss Aoi throwing some pinholders, and Miss Asai parried them with the chopper. I really wanted to have a look at it myself."

Tsuyako chuckled, being as cheerful as ever.

Her cheeks however looked a little slimmer, her eyes red.

"Senpai, I heard you got a lot of spiders thrown into the clubroom…"

"Oh that? Just some paintings and toys. They are not real. I was terrified of them at first, but I am used to it."

Koremitsu felt pained to see Tsuyako smile and pretend to be strong.

Hikaru too looked pained.

"Can't I just write some words on a piece of paper 'Spiders are forbidden' and stick it onto the door?"

"Thank you. Surely your words will be highly effective."

On this day, Koremitsu made the promise to write the words at home and hand it over the next day, and left Tsuyako's classroom.

He walked down the corridor, and sent Asai a message, **"I got something to talk to you. You mind?"**

Asai's reply was prompt—"I do not have anything to say to you".

"!!—she's the one who openly summoned me through the PA system. What's with this?"

"Asa really likes to seize advantage over the weaknesses others have, but she does not want to show her weaknesses."

"That's terrible of her! Humans shouldn't be like that!"

Koremitsu retorted at Hikaru's follow up(?), the ends of his lips curled.

He sent the same message to Aoi, and this time, he got another quick reply.
“Understood. I shall wait for you at the rooftop after school.”
Koremitsu was relieved that Aoi did not refuse him.
After school, Koremitsu went to the roof, and found Aoi waiting for him with a teary look.
”I-I am really sorry…to show you such an uncouth side of me.”
Her large black eyes were oozing out tears, and her white face was scarlet.
The long black hair flowed as Aoi bowed, embalming her petite body..
Her face was so heinous when she had that argument, yet she cringed and lowered her head when facing Koremitsu. At this point, she was the exact same person as the one with the usual cleanliness streak.

Koremitsu felt relieved—but at the same time, he was heartbroken by Aoi's ailing self.
"Did something happen between you and Saiga? If there's anything bothering you, just tell me."
Aoi lowered her head as she remained silent, and Koremitsu waited patiently.
"I am…very troubled."
She lifted her head, whispering,
"But,"
Her clear eyes were looking up at Koremitsu,
"This time, I want to do my best by myself."
With earnest eyes, Aoi pleaded to the startled Koremitsu with a desperate voice.
"I had received lots of care from you all this while, Mr Akagi. Whenever I felt troubled or worried, you would come to me and lead me by my hand; for that, I am happy. However, I cannot be letting you hold my hand forever, Mr Akagi, for it is no different from letting Asa do the same. So—I am in trouble, but I wish to handle my own troubles."
Koremitsu was speechless, and while he remained dumbstruck, Hikaru's face became increasingly stupefied from the side.
Aoi smiled bashfully.
"Once everything is over, I will confess to you again. At that time, please think of me."
Her determined, earnest eyes pierced through Koremitsu's heart, and Hikaru's eyes wavered in a fleeting manner.
The blooming white flower on the Sacred grounds were no longer caring out its own prettiness. Instead, it wanted the glint and sturdiness of the sword to dazzle—yet it was heartbreaking.
"…Understood."
That was all Koremitsu could answer at this moment.
Aoi's cheeks blushed happily, and as she leisurely bowed, the long black hair swayed in the wind. After that, she left.
Koremitsu sat on the icy concret; he, along with Hikaru, stared into the sky like idiots.
The sky was like a canvas dyed completely blue. It was radiant, yet forlorn.
Koremitsu blurted a weary voice,
"…I always took the words 'I'll protect you' so lightly…"
Perhaps that was a phrase more burdensome than what he had immediately.
"…"
Hikaru pondered with a melancholic look, looking hesitant to speak, his eyes lowered.
Koremitsu too gritted his teeth with bitterness, and stared into the sky. The dazzling sun brought discomfort to his eyes.

Was it not a form of arrogance to boldly proclaim that he would protect?
That was why…

—I feel pained…to be with you, Mr Akagi.

The way he said the word ‘protect’ was too simplistic and comforting to him, so he never thought of the other party’s will, reasons and reservations.
Whether it was Aoi’s feelings…or Yū…
The loneliness spread in his heart.
Feeling skeptical, he opened his phone, and gave Yū a call.
He placed the phone at his ear, and waited with bated breath, only to be left on voicemail. He sighed, and put the phone back into his pocket.
(That Shikibu too…what am I supposed to do…)
He recalled the forlorn silhouette of the back that left the classroom, and his heart got increasingly pained.
“Let’s go back.”
“Yeah…”
He raised his heavy hips, and left the rooftop. While walking down the stairs, he heard the siren of an ambulance.
“What’s the matter…?”
The crowd was bustling.
The students returning home chattered, their whispers reaching Koremitsu’s ears.

“—she fell.”

“She is unconscious.”

“The news club—”

The vengeful spirit struck, amongst such words, the name Oumi was mentioned.
A sudden shock came, Koremitsu’s head practically hammered.
(Oumi!?)
“Koremitsu!”
Hikaru too was stupefied.
“Hey! What happened to Oumi of the news club!?”
The whispering students lifted their heads in response, and let out startled voices. They then answered Koremitsu with quivering voices, saying that Oumi fell from the stairs, lost her consciousness, and was carted by the ambulance to the hospital.
Another shock struck Koremitsu’s head.

—I do have some interesting rumors that I can look into.”

—“What rumors?”

—“Give me a day. I’ll report to you.”

Half a day had yet to go by after he bade farewell to Oumi. One had to wonder how that nimble, energetic girl fell down the stairs and lost consciousness on this day.
Was it a coincidence?
The sound of a bug buzzing could be heard in his ears. Several people were muttering, and though he could not hear what they were saying, they were all female—

—The vengeful spirit is at work.

(How can such a thing be possible here!)
He shook off the ominous cloud roaming over his head, and went to the stairs Hiina slipped down.
There was nobody at all. Nobody dared to approach, possibly because they were terrified of a vengeful spirit possessing them.
The transparent sun rays shone upon the forlorn, mystifying corridor.
Suddenly, he spotted a glittering item.
“There seems to be something over there, Koremitsu.”
Hikaru muttered. Koremitsu went over to the glittering item, and bent down.
It was a long, thin silver chain.
It appeared to be a bracelet.
Startled, Hikaru widened his eyes. Koremitsu too immediately realized upon seeing that reaction.
(Doesn’t Shikibu always have such a chain with her?)
Koremitsu himself was unable to discern girl accessories. A chain was already a simple thing, and there were many similar ones sold at the shop. t seemed Hikaru had determined that it was the same as the one Honoka had.
Koremitsu too recalled the silver chain dangling on the wrist, and the hand holding it now became icy.
Here was the item similar to the Honoka always wore, and the stairs Hiina fell from.
What exactly did this mean—
Koremitsu held the chain firmly. Suddenly, footsteps could be heard.
Honoka came upstairs, appearing to be checking on what was going on.
Once she saw a heinous looking Koremitsu on the stairs, she gasped.
“…Akagi,why are you.”
“Oumi fell from the stairs, and got sent to the hospital.”
“…I just heard about that.”
She whispered.
“…I heard that she fell here.”

“Why did you come all the way here?”
“Can’t I? Didn’t you come here?”
Honoka turned her face aside.
Koremitsu approached her, and grabbed her right arm.
She widened her eyes,
“Wha—”
While Honoka tried to swing Koremitsu’s hand aside, the latter exerted more focus in his grip, and looked up at her.
Then, he saw that the silver chain bracelet on Honoka’s wrist, the one he saw in the day, was gone. Upon seeing that, the irises of his eyes cauterized along with his head.
“Let go.”
“Your bracelet, what happened to it?”
“Huh?”
Honoka looked completely perplexed.
“I’m asking where exactly is your bracelet. Didn’t you always have it on your wrist?”
Overwhelmed by Koremitsu’s presence, Honoka’s eyes weakened a little.
“I lost it today…”
“Where?”
“At the classroom veranda. It fell.”
Her eyes and tone got feisty as she said, and she forcefully removed herself from Koremitsu’s grip.
Koremitsu handed the bracelet to Honoka, and the latter was flabbergasted.
“This is mine…!? You picked it?”
“Yeah, on these stairs.”
“Eh?”
Honoka’s face again looked perplexed.
“And then?”
Koremitsu pressed on with an intimidating vice.”
“What were you doing, Shikibu? You weren’t paying a visit at the hospital when I met you there. Stop trying to bluff me. Say it!!”
Fury and anxiety ascended Koremitsu’s throat.
Honoka Shikibu would not belittle or hurt others without any baseless reason.
Koremitsu knew that very well.
It was because of that however that Honoka took action alone behind Koremitsu back, and that was making his anxious and furious, his head about to explode.
What was she thinking exactly? Why did she want to search through Yū’s photos?
Did she take them while stalking her? Why?
(Why’s your bracelet at the place Oumi fell from!?)
He wanted to understand, even when it meant grabbing Honoka’s shoulders.

If not, Honoka would continue to do some strange things behind Koremitsu's back. There was a chance Honoka herself could be in danger, just like Hiina who was hospitalized—if it were to end up being an irreversible trauma—
If she was to to lose her life because of that!
Honoka's lips quivered as she stared at him.
"Why must I be yelled at by you!?"
"I'm worried about you!!"
Upon seeing Koremitsu vent his erratic feelings upon her, Honoka showed a faint expression for just an instance. Her eyes became a little moist, and she then pouted, giving Koremitsu a tragic look…
She then raised her eyebrows, and in her protest, gave Koremitsu an emotional outburst.
"I don't need your worry! You're always skipping classes to meet Miss Kanai!!"
Koremitsu was speechless.
Honoka's expression contorted, and she kept yelling.

"There's no way you can protect two at once!"

Koremitsu stood there, dumbfounded, seemingly slapped in the face.
Was it wroong for him to say he would protect? Was it shallow? Arrogant?
The conflicted feelings swirled in his mind, ensnaring his heart.

—I'll protect you!

He said this to Honoka, and to all the other girls.
If anything was to happen to him, he would definitely help them.
I'll definitely protect you.
To Koremitsu, it was a matter of fact that he was to protect those weaker than me.
He just wanted to protect those in trouble.
But as Honoka had said, it was impossible for him to protect two at once.
Honoka kept clenching her fists, yelling with such agitation,
"I'm strong enough that any half-hearted worry is troublesome to me! Stop caring about me!!"
The thin brown hair and mini-skirt spun half a round in the air, and she turned to leave, her long slender legs strode off, not caring to be with Koremitsu for even a second longer.
He had to give chase.
If he did not, Honoka would continue to leave, be distant, and vanish.
If he was to give chase—
The cellphone vibrated in his pants pocket.
He stopped in his tracks, wanting to yell as he fished the phone out, and opened the anonymous message.

“Koremitsu Akagi shall execute Yū Kanai by the gullotine in the name of the Poppy.”

An image appeared in his mind; one with a chilling, shiny blade cutting at Yū’s slender neck—and then at Honoka’s, and then Koremitsu’s.
Koremitsu felt a chill down his back, his body covered in cold sweat.
“Koremitsu, give Yū a call.”
Hikaru’s anxious voice could be heard from the side, and while his vision remained blurred, Koremitsu gave Yū a call without a second thought.
Tak…an emotionless sound was followed by the voicemail.

—I can’t protect, can I?

—Two at once?

—I can’t protect, can I?

He had to give chase after Honoka.
He had to be with Yū.
He had to—leave one behind.
Honoka’s dashing footsteps down the stairs could no longer be heard.
“!”
Feeling incapacitated as he tried to save his hide, Koremitsu darted down the stairs.
To the hospital.
To Yū.
♢
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I’m like a spider resting on the petal, eyeing its prey. This is to rid the other women trying to bewitch him.
Everyone thinks of me as an honest, harmless person, so I can blend into anything no matter what happens.
Nobody that approach and talk to me will put their guard against me.
Most would open their hearts when they feel I am more foolish than them, and they can be manipulated.

For example, her.
She’s not used to seeing her love interest being lured by a girl more tender and weaker than her, that he kept being with her all the time, doting on her like a princess.
On the surface, she appeared to be a trusted assistance. She believed she could act nonchalant if she could just offer herself to her, but she had only hate for the girl beside him.
What can she do to remove that girl from his side.

Yes. There are many girls other than her who thought they were the one special to him.
There's the one who assumed herself to be more collected, more manipulative than anyone else, yet she makes decisions based on emotions, her plan completely flawed.
There's that one girl who grew up sheltered by the people around her, feeling conflicted about it, and tried to gain independence by working at a cafe.
There's that one girl who's carefree, always saying things boys like to hear, pretending to be a good woman, but is a flirtatious one.
There's that girl who went everywhere sniff, the area below her nose like a rotten mongrel
There's the girl who used her prepubescent as a weapon, latching onto her target with innocence.
And there is the one who deemed herself to be the righteous one, obsessed with the superiority of protecting those weaker than her—

I, fused with the Rokujō, is able to see with her eyes, use her power.
While the foolish—wretched women are buried in distrust, I shall flame the unrest, and stoke the hatred.

He betrayed you.
He's fooled by that woman.
You're the only one who can save him.

Wretched people will cannibalize each other, destroying themselves.
They should reveal, slander, despise, curse, and sink to the bottom.

"In the name of Rokujō, 'I' shall command.

Chapter 5

"Mr Akagi…"

It appeared Yū was about to head out. She was holding a little bag, standing at the door.

She had just turned around, and widened her eyes when she potted him.

Surely his hair and clothes were all sweaty, his cheeks and fringe tense, his eyes bloodshot, his shoulders puffing, and he appeared to be a step away from death.

The emotional brake Koremitsu had completely broke by the time he arrived, and he grabbed Yū by her slender shoulders, pressing her onto the door.

"Didn't I tell you not to go out! Why—-why don't you just understand!?"

“Koremitsu, calm down!”
Hikaru treated to stop Koremitsu, but the latter’s penting emotions broke through his chest, ripped his throat apart, and went amok. Yū’s slender shoulders were practically about to be crushed.
“If you’re to go out alone—if-if-if something’s going to happen to you, what will I do? Do you understand your situation? Someone already sent me a text saying that you’ll be executed ‘by the gullotine’! I can’t protect you if you’restill so careless! I—I won’t have a purpose coming to where you are, right!?”
He just repeated his words over and over again, not allowing any time for others to talk, and he fully expressed his shattered feelings.
He was unable to protect either Yū or Honoka, and his chest was practically ripped apart as he ran towards her. Yet Yū wanted to head out as if nothing had happened—
“I gave up on Shikibu just to be with you, Yū!”
“Calm down! Koremitsu! Yū’s terrified by you!”
Hikaru raised his voice, and Koremitsu finally composed himself.
The little white face looked eerily pale, the fleeting eyes showing fear. The shoulders grabbed by his hands wre shivering.
(W-what did I just do…?)
“…!”
He relaxed his fingertips, suffocated by his pathetic self, slammed his head above Yū’s shoulder and onto the door, keeping it lowered.
“Mr…Akagi.”
Yū spoke tentatively.
“Let’s go inside and talk…I won’t be…going anywhere…”
Koremitsu was unable to lift his head, and Yū whispered, “I’m fine…I just got a little cut…on the fingertip…from a knife…” her right index finger was wrapped in a band-aid, “There was…a little blade between the door gap…it was dangerous…” she spoke as if nothing happened.
“Hey…I-I’m still fine. I’m here, right?”
“……”
“It’s just a little cut on the finger. Nothing happened, okay?”
“…”
The cold fingertips touched Koremitsu’s face. Yū got on her knees in front of Koremitsu as she looked up, looking very worried.
“But why are you crying, Mr Akagi…?”
“…”
Salty water trickled down the stiffened face; the icy bullets fell upon the clenched fists placed on the knees.
With her slender fingers, Yū again wiped Koremitsu’s tears away.
Right in front of the blurred vision was the fleeting, worried face looking up at him. Hikaru too watched Koremitsu with a tragic expression from there.
“Mr Akagi…what are you worried about right now? You seem…to have mentioned, about Miss Shikibu just now…”

—I gave up on Shikibu just to be with you, Yū!

Koremitsu whimpered as he recalled the crude, barbaric words he said to Yū.
I'm horrible. I was the one who decided to come to Yū and I'm the one throwing my tantrum…
"Tell me…Mr Akagi. What happened between you and Miss Shikibu…?"
He could not rein in the regret tore at his heart, and the oblivion struck at his head. It was really embarrassing for him.
"Mr Akagi."
Yū held Koremitsu gently by the hand. The latter lowered his head saying, "Shikibu…well, it appears that she got too involved in something bad. I understand that well, but I can't do anything—"
"Mr Akagi's Heliotrope…her legs are pretty…and she is a girl with pretty eyes…"
'Mr Akagi's Heliotrope"—why did Yū mention it at this moment?
Perhaps she was trying to mean 'she is not one of Hikaru's girls', and Koremitsu was not in the mood to think further into it. He had difficulty breathing the moment her name was mentioned, and his heart was shattered.
"Shikibu's really a good person. She helped me out a few times—really, she's always with me whenever I was in a rut, encouraging me, giving me hints…if she's in trouble in any way, I too want to help. She's a girl too, so I have to protect her. But Shikibu said that she doesn't want my help."

—There's no way you can protect two at once!

He already knew about that.
The word protect was filled with lies and fallacies.

—I'm strong enough that any half-hearted worry is troublesome to me!

Honoka's eyes were tragic as she yelled.

—Stop caring about me!!
The sight of her storming off in a huff and quivering appeared in his mind, and his heart again felt ready to be ripped apart. If he was to givve chase after Honoka back then, he would have knelt down haplessly in front of her, worried about Yū.
"…Mr Akagi, you came to me, instead of Miss Shikibu…?"
Yū quietly murmured.
"So that's whyyou're in pain…"
Her voice was filled with agony.
"Miss Shikibu…must have been someone very important to you, Mr Akagi."

“…yeah.”
Koremitsu answered hoarsely, and Yū remained silent. She again looked hurt, but sounded determined as she slowly spoke,
“I think…I can understand what Miss Shikibu is feeling…just like you, she’s the type who wants to protect others…she’s not the only one…Mr Akagi, you’re always protecting girls, but girls too do want to protect those they love…”
Yū’s words trickled silently into Koremitsu’s heart.
Do girls really want to protect those they love?
“They don’t want…those they love…to experience unpleasant memories…if those they love end up hurt because of the desire to ‘protect’…they’ll be sad…so…”
Hikaru watched Yū and listened to her words with a pained expression.
Koremitsu too felt a pricking pain in his heart, recalling what Aoi said.
The words, Whenever I felt troubled or worried, you would come to me and lead me by my hand; for that, I am happy.
And also, However, I cannot be letting you hold my hand forever, Mr Akagi.

—So—I am in trouble, but I wish to handle my own troubles. Once everything is over, I will confess to you again. At that time, please think of me.

Aoi, whom he assumed to be a weak, glided princesss, smiled with such an earnest face—
“Mr Akagi, you’re suffering…just to protect me. I…don’t like that at all. I too…have my own issues…that I want…to protect. I want to be with you, to help you…”
The pain Hikaru felt when he heard Aoi’s words, Koremitsu felt it too.
A scorching flame ached deep within his his heart.
He was riveted by Aoi’s attitude, trying to rein in the loneliness.Yū’s words again caused Koremitsu to fully accept it.
As Yū had said, while Koremitsu wanted to protect others, the ones being protected end up hating it. He did not know what to protect, or how to go about doing it.
(Yū’s… suffering because of my protection…was she always suffering this much…)
Back then, Yū remained shut in her apartment, unwilling to exit, and was so fragile that she was terrified of raindrops. She was a girl who could not live without the help of others. However,

—I won’t run away anymore.

Back then, Yū shivered as she explained to Koremitsu in the park that she was going to Australia.

What exactly were her feelings back then? She did not send a single message or a make a call to him, and remained in foreign land all the time. What exactly did she experience? Was Yū's hard work all denied because of his selfish desire to protect her?
Koremitsu grabbed Yū's arms as the latter wiped his tears off.
The tender arms cringed in surprise when met with Koremitsu's coarse hands.
Koremitsu held onto those arms, and lowered his head, devoid of confidence, hissing,
"It's a stubborn request for me—you'll be frustrated and troubled, but, please, don't go out today."
He wanted to respect Yū's feelings, to understand her feelings, but at this point, he was not in the mood to do so. He had yet to understand the enemy's real identity while he continued to be toyed with. All he could do was to protect the one in front of him—
Yū again remained silent. She stared at Koremitsu intently while the latter lowered his head, saying,
"Okay, it's a promise."
The soft voice answered.
Koremitsu, overwhelmed by the anxiety, was engulfed in the tendernness of an older sister wanting to soothe him.
"Can I, come back again?"
He lifted his head wearily, and Yū showed a faint smile.
"Yes."
Yū's face felt very similar to the tragic smile Hikaru would show.
"Mr Akagi, I…wish to have a date with you next time. Can you go out with me next time?"
"Yeah…"
"I'm relieved. Now we have a promise too."
Yū reached her pinky out.
Koremitsu too reached his finger at the white, slender finger.
Yū again showed that faint smile as she sent Koremitsu off, and whispered before she closed the door,
"You have to…properly convey your feelings to Miss Shikibu, Mr Akagi."
The door closed silently.
With his anguished, arduous feelings, Koremitsu stood at the door, watching it.
"Let us go, Koremitsu."
If Hikaru had not spoken up, perhaps Koremitsu would have stayed there the entire time.
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♢ ♢
"Mr Akagi…I'm sorry."
Yū stared at the closed door, whispering.

A long time passed after she watched Koremitsu leave, and she stood there, looking anguished.
He was forceful and earnest when he grabbed Yū's hand and pulled her to the outside world. He kept coming after her, hurting himself, and kept weeping, unable to stand up at all.
When she decided to return to Japan, Yū felt so delighted, so blissful that she was able to meet Koremitsu again, her elation to a point where she could fly.
(I…caused Mr Akagi so much pain.)
Koremitsu was simply worried about Yū. The first lie, coupled with others, meant that there was an increasing number of things she could not say to Koremitsu.
If it's Miss Shikibu, what will she do? Yū thought of the girl who was Koremitsu's classmate.
Unlike Yū, she was a cheerful, feisty girl. Her clothing and hairstyle were pretty, and surely she had a lot of friends. If Koremitsu called her the Heliotrope, that probably meant that she was not lying to him.
Honoka boldly stated her own opinions to Koremitsu—that was probably the reason for the conflict.
With that, Honoka was able to speak to Koremitsu on equal standing. Yū was envious of her.
Koremitsu said that he chose Yū, but that was because Yū appeared to be more feeble than Honoka…Koremitsu would never leave such girls behind.
(When exactly…can I tell Mr Akagi…the truth…?)
Or was it that she could only continue to lie?
While her heart remained engulfed in anxiety, the cellphone placed on the table rang.
Other than Koremitsu, the only one who would give Yū a call was…
With a heavy heart, she received the call, and placed the phone at her ear.
"Yes, I know…I'm fine…I'm going out now."
The utterly lifeless voice stopped, and she got ready to head out.
♢
♢ ♢
Night quickly arrived, and Koremitsu walked down the narrow path leading to his house under the lonely sky.
With the frigid winds blowing, the slouched Koremitsu slowly dragged his feet dejectedly, and Hikaru quietly talked about flowers.
"The Patrinia did appear in the Man'yōshū.It is one of the 7 herbs of Autumn…'From Summer to Autumn, there are yellow flowers blooming at the tip of the fine green branches…the name Patrinia refers to 'overwhelming', where even beauties cannot beat it. Some say that the little yellow flowers were similar to the millet rice the women of that time ate—in other words, the
'beauty rice'. The same too goes for the bride too; back then, they use the terms noble daughters or madame."

Koremitsu listened without a comment rather than remain by the side and remain silent with a gloomy look. Hikaru too just wanted to continue rattling.
“There was also themed around ‘Patrinia’. A wife had mistaken assumed that her husband had abandoned her, and jumped off the cliff. There was a spot of Patrinias growing by the tombstone, but whenever the husband approached the the flowers, they would wobble…when the husband left, it would grow back to its original position…it would fade backwards again when he approached…the husband felt rejected like his deceased wife…and in his despair, he too jumped off the cliff where his wife died from.”
In any case, they should have talked it out more, right?

—I suppose Hikaru killed himself.

Whether Tsuyako’s words were doubts of truth, one did not know.
Hikaru said that he fell from the riverbank, saying that it was an accident. It was still unknown however whether that was the truth.
Also, there were the injuries on the wrist. Hikaru never explained them to Koremitsu.
As a ghost, Hikaru did not have those injuries on him.
Tsuyako said that she saw them before.
Did Hikaru feel despair over the love that could never be fulfilled, and sought death thereafter?

—and in his despair, he too jumped off the cliff.

The words he just heard continued to echo in his ears, and he felt a chill.
“…Was that your personal experience?”
He cautiously asked, hushing his voice.
Hikaru maintained his smile,
“It is just a drama theme.”
And curtly replied,
“You have to be careful not to allow that to happen. It is too late for me, but your is just beginning.”
“I won’t be jumping off a cliff or anything.”
Koremitsu curled his lips as he replied.
“Is that so?”
Hikaru continued with a tender expression,
“But when you were rejected by Miss Shikibu and Yū, all I could see was you blaming and hurting yourself.”
“Ugh.”
Koremitsu recalled how uncouth he looked when he ran all the way to Yū’s room, and went speechless, his face gradually sizzling.
“You too will becoming self-loathing, just as I was when I was rejected by that person.”

“Do-don’t put me on the same level as you! I-I’m not going to be a crybaby like you…wait.”
“Have you forgotten? I cannot cry. You will cry when you indulge in alcohol, and that, really is a crybaby.”
“Don’t say that I’ll cry when I drink!!”
Koremitsu bellowed in the middle of the streets. Any passers-by would have assumed he was drunk if they heard his words, but it seemed relieving to Koremitsu that he was able to pent out all the frustrations gathered within him.”
Though his heart was still burning like fire.
(Is this guy angering me on purpose?)
If it was Hikaru, it might have been possible.
He glanced to the side, and found Hikaru giving a mischievous chuckle, following with a buoyant voice,
“Hey, let us continue with the topic.”
“What topic?”
“Whether the man or the woman was in the wrong, that I thought the man was in the wrong.”
“Stop talking about the past!”
“Well, do hear me out. You are the only one on the planet whom I can talk with. Also, this has something to do with you.”
“…What?”
Koremitsu remained wary as he retorted, and Hikaru gave an amicable face, saying,
“Till this point, I always assumed that I had to protect my flowers, water them, give them fertilizer, remove the parasites, and care for them earnestly.
Perhaps the flowers, girls…are sturdier than what we think. After looking at Miss Aoi, Yū, and Miss Shikibu…that was my conclusion.”
The effeminate lips opened and closed, beaming. Though they looked tender, there was a trace of solitude in them.
“Now then…what do you think I need to do?”
If the girls were strong enough not to require protection.
“I guess. What shall you do?”
Hikaru folded his arms and nodded away in response.
“You’re not giving me any advice?”
“Ahaha. I do not have a choice. I only did realize this after I did. Let us think about this together.”
“O-okay.”
Koremitsu gruffly responded.
Perhaps the girls are sturdier than what we think. Hikaru’s words kept repeating in Koremitsu’s heart.
Girls are fragile.
That was Koremitsu’s assumption.

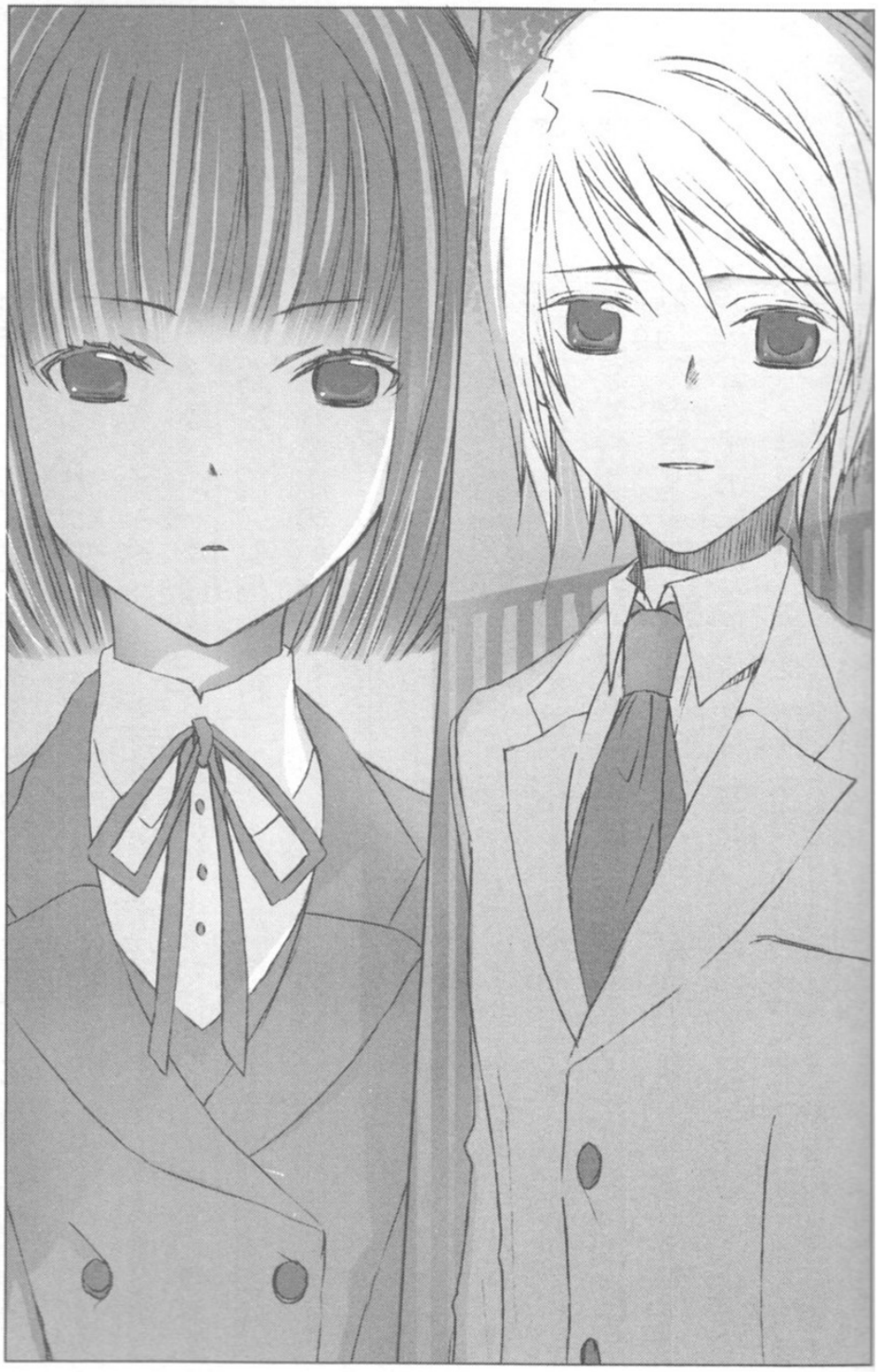
To fulfill the promises Hikaru had yet to fulfill, he got involved with girls, and helped them. It appeared that at this point, they were fragile flowers, easily snapped by the wind. If he did not run over with arms spread out to protect them, they would wilt.
(What about Shikibu?)
That girl strong, has her own thoughts, and can protect himself. Yet why am I still concerned about her?/em>
If Koremitsu, till this point, had been taking action because of the 'frailty' exhibited by Hikaru's flowers, what exactly was Honoka…?
Koremitsu curled his lips, sinking into his own thoughts.
Suddenly, *"Ah."* Hikaru blurted.
There was a girl with a neat, pretty face dressed in a local city girls uniform, standing near the doors of Koremitsu's house. The black hair was shoulder-length, combed to the back, and those clear eyes—
It was the girl who often visited the cafe Aoi worked at, the one Hikaru dubbed as 'Miss Mint'.
Once he approached her, she spoke with a voice as refreshing as her face.
"I did provide you with my address, but you have yet to contact me."
On the day of the culture festival, she paid a visit to the juice stand Koremitsu was manning as a member of the Japanese dance club, and left him a
namecard with a mail address recorded on it.

—My master wishes to talk to you.

—The prettiest flower in the world, an angelic woman

There seemed to be another meaning to those words…
Hikaru seemed to have noticed something back then, and he kept staring at the girl.
Koremitsu too seemed to have a premonition. He actually intended to contact her after the culture festival ended and meet that master. The commotion that happened thereafter resulted in him forgetting about it.
The namecard still remained in his student handbook.
"Sorry. A lot of things happened."
"It appears so."
She answered, sounding as if she knew of Koremitsu's predicament.

"Mikoto."



Hikaru suddenly called out.
Koremitsu turned to him, and he showed a nostalgic face—followed by a melancholic one.
“You are Mikoto, right? That person’s ‘favorite prized possession’, Mikoto who resembles cool Mint?”
“Are you Mikoto?”
Koremitsu tensed his face as he confirmed, and she merely widened her eyes slightly.
“Yes. I suppose you have heard about me from Mr Hikaru?”
“Yeah.”
After Koremitsu’s reply, Hikaru inquired quietly,
“What do you want from my friend? Mikoto?”
“What do you want to talk to me about?”
“About the Wisteria Mr Hikaru does not know of.”
Hikaru looked startled.
Mikoto averted her glance for just a while. The straight black hair fluttered near the shoulders.
“However, I shall return another day. Please do settle your issues as early as possible, and not spend too much time about it.”
I shall return. After saying that, Mikoto strode away with elegant steps, her back straight, and she vanished into the other end of the narrow residential street..
“That person…what I do not know of.”
Hikaru stated blankly.
(Wisteria? As in Hikaru’s stepmother? Is Mikoto her servant?)
At this moment, the cellphone in his phone rang.
“ENOUGH ALREADY!”
He gruffly opened his phone, and then the message, only to gasp.

Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **YOU SLUT!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **YOU FILTHY BITCH!** Execute Yū Kanai! **YOU NYMPHO!** Execute Yū Kanai! **I'LL CURSE YOU!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **BURN!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **I'LL WRECK YOU!** Execute Yū Kanai! **RIP YOUR SKIN OUT!** Execute Yū Kanai! **YOU BLACK-HEARTED WOMAN!** Execute Yū Kanai! **HANG YOU!** Execute Yū Kanai! **STAB YOU!** Execute Yū Kanai! **YOU FUCKING BITCH!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **CRUCIFY YOU!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **OFF WITH YOUR HEAD!** Execute Yū Kanai! **YOU WHORE!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **POISON YOU!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **IN THE NAME OF THE POPPY!!** Execute Yū Kanai! Karma! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **GORGE YOUR EYES OUT!** Execute Yū Kanai! **RIP YOUR VAGINA OUT!** Execute Yū Kanai! **YOU PIECE OF SHIT!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **CUT YOUR NOSE OFF!** Execute Yū Kanai! **YOU ROTTEN FLESH!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **STAB YOU WITH A HOT POKER!** Execute Yū Kanai! **BEAR A BESTIAL CHILD!** Execute Yū Kanai! **KILL! KILL! KILL!** Execute Yū Kanai! **BE HAUNTED BY A VENGFUL SPIRIT!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **YOU UGLY WOMAN!** Execute Yū Kanai! **LET YOUR FACE ROT!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! **DRINK SOME ACID!** Execute Yū Kanai! **YOU WRETCHED SLUT!** Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai! Execute Yū Kanai!

The screen was crammed with words, drifting and floating. He had a feeling that his throat was bitten, he had difficulty breathing, and he let loose a groan from his dry lips.
Hikaru too looked pale as he watched from the side. Koremitsu's sweat-soaked fingers dialed Yū's number immediately.
But nobody picked it up! It was a voicemail.
"Let's get back to Yū!"
"Yes."
Koremitsu turned around, and sprinted off.
He tried calling Yū a few times, only to be met by the voicemail over and over again. Koremitsu gritted his teeth and clenched his fists.
It would be great if it was just a lousy prank like how it was till this point.
He kept praying, his head practically lopped off.
Once he got to the hospital, he stormed to the reception with his eyes bloodshot, only to be told that Yū went out. The blood in his body froze.

—It's a promise.

Yū answered with that soft, gentle voice when Koremitsu pleaded with her not to head out on this night.
Yet, she did.
"Where did she go?"
"I didn't ask."
The female receptionist answered skeptically.
He pestered her, stating that he forgot something very important, and wanted to go in, emphasizing that he had to be the one to find it. Finally, he was allowed in.
If there was some sort of a hint in the room—
The first thing that entered his sight was the bouquet of crimson flowers placed on the sofa. They were wrapped in tape and wrapping paper.
"It is the Poppy..."
Hikaru's face contorted.
The petals looked translucent, and the flowers were left on the sofa, not placed in a vase or something, yet it remained alluring, bewitching. The black iris in the middle looked so salacious.
Koremitsu's face tensed as he held the bouquet in his hands. The crimson flowers swayed due to his carelessness, and a few fell onto the sofa.
"Hm…? What's inside…"
"What is the matter, Koremitsu?"
"There's a little bag inside the bouquet of flowers."
He turned the bouquet upside down, and a transparent bag fell onto the sofa along with the crimson petals.
(Drug capsules…?)
But if it was for flu or gastric issues, why was it put here? It appeared to be put inside deliberately—

“Koremitsu, this is an illegal drug! I saw it before! It was still legal back then, but it causes hallucinations, and has a high chance of addition. It is now prohibited.”
“What did you say!?”
Koremitsu’s blood again boiled due to Hikaru’s words.
“Why is such a thing in Yū’s room!?”
“I do not know. But, maybe—”
Hikaru raised his voice slightly.
“Perhaps the one taking care of Yū has some involvement in drug dealing.”
Yū did say that he helped arrange for the accommodations, flight and everything else, that he was a sincere man.
She even said that the identity of that person was still a secret.
At first, she was delighted. Whenever Koremitsu asked about him later on however, she would look perturbed.
(She said that it’s because of him that she became a volunteer. Is that actually
—)
His stomach was wrecked.
“Koremitsu, switch on the computer.”
With Hikaru’s prodding, Koremitsu darted towards the notepad computer on the table, and switched on the power.
Once he affirmed the records, he connected to a suspicious website.
Hikaru, watching from the side, let out a sharp gasp,
“As I had expected…! This is a site for drug dealing! It is done through codename use, but there is no doubt this is it!”
“!!”
The panel also showed a record of drug dealing, and the records was the red flowers—upon seeing that the seller was the Poppy, the palm holding the mouse was covered in sweat.
The long hair and slender body indicated on the website was a girl in her teens. This girl with the appearance of the Poppy was Yū!
It appeared that there was another deal later on. Koremitsu’s eyes remained on the seller, the Poppy, and the customers hoping to make a purchase—and he shivered.
“Hey, this customer is!”

—The name is Heliotrope

—Hello, Mr Heliotrope.

Wait…it isn’t possible—but—
“Shikibu…?”
The moment he uttered that word, he felt dizzy.
“If it is Miss Shikibu, it is possible.”
Hikaru’s words again reached his heart.

Yes, it might possibly be Honoka. He could not think of anyone else who would use an uncommon plant, the Heliotrope, as an online nickname.
The seller was Yū!
The customer was Honoka!
(What is going on here!?)
Koremitsu tried calling Honoka on his phone.
“I’m not getting through!”
“What do we do now, Koremitsu!?”
“What else!? Get to the trading place!”
Just when Koremitsu was about to dash out.
Yū, holding crimson flowers, looked surprised as she stood there.
“Mr Akagi…why?”
“Yū! Didn’t I tell you not to go out!!”
Yū cringed, fidgeting as she answered.
“I dropped…my phone…there’s a map of the place where I’m supposed to work at…so…I came back to get back.”
Yū, who broke the promise, was terrified to know if Koremitsu was furious. She averted her eyes towards the sofa, and showed an awkward face.
“Why…is there another…bouquet…of flowers? Mr Akagi…did you bring it here?”
Over there were the Poppies, exactly the same as the one Yū was holding onto. It was thrown there, the petals all over.
“What are you saying now? Aren’t there drugs inside this one? You’re going to the customer, right? The flowers there are—”
“Ah!”
Koremitsu seized the flowers from Yū’s hand, and inspected it himself. However, there was nothing other than the faint red flowers. He undid the sash and unraveled the bouquet, only to find none of what he had assumed.
“Yū’s flowers…do not have any drugs…that is…”
Hikaru too frowned.
Yū in turn was terrified by his sudden action of snatching the flowers, and she cringed back, her eyes filled with fear.
Koremitsu brought the drugs to Yū.
“This was inside that bouquet. The computer records also showed the sales history of the ‘Poppy’! Yū, isn’t the place you were where the deal was?”
Yū’s face paled, and she said,
“Drugs…wh-what? The computer history…I only gave the flowers to the old men and chatted with them…”
“Where’s the volunteer work today?”
Frightened, Yū mentioned the location; it was a different place from where the Poppy and Heliotrope were supposed to strike the deal, completely opposite directions.
What exactly was going on?
While his mind was in chaos, the only thing he could affirm was that the one in danger was the Heliotrope Honoka.

“Koremitsu, if we do not stop Miss Shikibu now!”
“Yū, before I get back, don’t you go out! I don’t need a promise now, but anyway, just stay here! Have a look at that computer!”
The voice echoed in the room, causing Yū to shiver.
Without waiting for Yū’s response, he darted out of the room, and ran towards where Honoka was along with Hikaru.

That idiot Shikibu!!
Don’t just use the Heliotrope name for fun!
What are you doing!! You idiot!!
Koremitsu’s eyes were bloodshot, his breathing erratic as he glared at the phone like a demon. The other passengers moved away from him, terrified.
(Why did Shikibu know that Yū may be a drug dealer, and didn’t say anything to me. She just did things by herself, and not only that, told me that she doesn’t need help. You got to be kidding!)
Inside his mind was a lot of things he wanted to say to her.
“It is fine, Miss Shikibu will be fine even until you reached her. She is strong.
You do know that, right?”
Hikaru encouraged Koremitsu.
(Yeah, that girl’s kick is invincible. I should know after who knows how many kicks I took. If she’s attacked by an assailant from a corner or surrounded by many, what can she do? It’s reckless for her to be trapped, even if she’s strong.)
“Stop ignoring me! Pick up the phone, you idiot!”
One had to wonder how many times he had mentioned the word ‘idiot’. He gritted his teeth as he sent the message, but he yet yet to receive any contact from Honoka.
What should he do at this point.
The train seemed to be moving slower than usual, and his face got more hideous.
He felt anxious, impatient, and to calm himself down, scanned through Honoka’s site, at the blog entries filled with colored words, the cellphone novels that were as sweet as poems, love consultation, and so on.

“Hello, Purple Princess □(´
▽ □) □. Please hear out some of Yuyu’s
love troubles.”

“Hello, Purple Princess! Help me ° ° (≥Д≤) ° ° !! I said some terrible things to the Mr Y I like!”

“Hello there, this is Macaron <{_ _*)>, I have something I am very troubled by. Before this, I told Mr T
sitting next to me that I wish to go

out with him. I do like him, but I don’t really know whether it’s really a like. I feel anxious. I’m not really sure of my own fe e lings o(: ; △) o”

“The advice I received from you a few days back was really helpful, (o^ ^ ▽ o)l Thanks to you, I managed to confess to Mr U, Purple Prince ss~~~~~~~~~~~\o(^ ^) ▽ o/ . You really are the love expert, Purple Prince ss. My re al re al re al savior he re o(*^ ^ ▽ *) o.”

The comments were all filled with the love troubles and discussions girls had.
Honoka was dubbed the Purple Princess, the love expert, answering every issue intimately and cheerfully.

“Congratulations on your succe s sful confe ssion λ (◠ ◠)o∠★! Good for you, Miss Kuya! This isn’t my power here; it’s your hard work that managed to get to him.”

“Do apologize to Mr Y immediately, Miss Snow! Don’t send him messages. Tell him directly that you’re sorry. Then, tell him honestly why you said those words. It’s fine . He ’ll de finite ly unde rstand! (^-^) ” ☆

“Miss Macaron, it is worth cheering that you managed to improve your relationship, but you might be feeling uneasy (¯ ^¯ ;;;), that your good relationship till this point may be broken. Isn’t your reply already the re though? (*^ ^ ▽ *) 10 years later,

when you think of the boys you were with, if the first face you think of is Mr T, that means he's your 'special one'."

Koremitsu could practically hear Honoka's cheerful voice.

—Okay! Leave it to me, Akagi!

—You really, really, really don't understand a girl's feelings at all!

—Guess I got no choice. As the love expert, I'll help you out here.

There was neither a speckle of dust, nor a fragment of an illusion.
It was just Honoka, with her chest puffed, her eyebrows raised as she opened her lips, trying to act tough.
The purple Heliotrope blooming towards the sun.
Till this point, one had to wonder how much encouragement, how much help he had received.
Though she was grumbled at a lot when Aoi would not listen to Koremitsu, Honoka still did her best to think of ways to break through Aoi's heart. Also, she was with Koremitsu, watching the shoe locker since morning, and went through serious rehearsals with the rigid Koremitsu in front of the cat shop.

—Hey, Akagi. The cats you saved from drowning in the river yesterday, are they okay?
The same happened when Yū remained shut in her room. *"Okay, I'll help. I'll be Miss Kanai's friend.* She smiled as she accepted the request. Even when Koremitsu was anxious after being rejected by Yū, she lent him her foldable umbrella, letting him use it as an umbrella.

—No, you definitely won't buy an umbrella. Use it now, or I'll go with you!

It'll definitely be useful. She smiled as she handed it to him.
When Shioriko disappeared, and his gut was about to be wrecked, "I'll look for that girl through the internet." she began to search through the internet.
When Tsuyako was troubled, after seeing her kiss Koremitsu, she should have been furious, but when Asai raided the clubroom, when Tsuyako was in grave danger, and when Koremitsu came yelling,

—I'll do my best to take care of upperclassman Tsuyako. I'll encourage her. Don't think too hard by yourself.
She was always worried about Koremitsu, thinking about him.
And when Koremitsu was frustrated because of Asai.

—How about walking with that person?

—How about you follow instead of waiting and regretting? If anything happens, you can help that person, and that person might listen to your suggestions. If it's me, I'll definitely follow

The earnest words caused Koremitsu to not remain perplexed.
Back then, the wide path was paved in front of him.
The same happened during the commotion over Sora's pregnancy, or when Koremitsu became a committee member during the culture festival, a role he was unfamiliar with, or whenever he was overwhelmed by the workload, Honoka would always push aside her own matters to help him.
One by one, he recalled that clumsy sincerity of Honoka, that obvious worry, the riveting, powerful encouragements, the pure innocence of not need anything in return.
They oozed out, causing bitterness in his chest.

"To be honest, I'm not a love expert at all."

At the end, there was Honoka's entry.

"I never had a dating experience with a guy, and I have crush on my classmate. Like everyone, I'll feel flustered whenever I think about that guy I like. That guy has the appearance of a delinquent, and has a gruff way of speaking. However, he's really kind at heart, very manly, and won't love anyone alone when they'r in trouble. He's a really, really good guy. A good man. I always swiveled around on the chair, wondering how do I convey these feelings to him."
Koremitsu was momentarily breathless as he stared at the words shown on the little screen.
He did not hear the tremors of the train, nor the departure bell.
All he heard was Honoka's voice echoing in his ears.
"I was never viewed as a girl by that guy. That guy likes someone completely opposite of me. She's a graceful, delicate girl, and I have no hope at all. Even so, I still can't stop loving him. I don't mind if my love in unrequited. I don't mind if he just thinks of me as a friend. I love that guy, and I want to be his strength.
Why did Honoka keep this secret from Koremitsu and investigated on Yū alone?
Why did she have to do such a dangerous thing, to buy drugs.
Honoka yelled that he did not need to protect her—Honoka would protrude her lips when in doubt—Honoka would seem ready to burst into tears whenever he was not available—the different sides of her appeared in front of him.

"I'm not a love expert, and I'm sorry for not saying this all this time. However, my feelings of wanting to cheer everyone on isn't a lie.

Whether this love will actually happen or not, the efforts clearly aren't for naught. That's why, let's do our best, everyone. I'll do my best!"

he continued to scroll down the cellphone, but he could not do so, for it appeared to be the perfect ending.
Koremitsu read everything down to the last line, and dejectedly muttered, "…you idiot."

Chapter 6

You see, you got baited.
Did you not realize? You have long fallen into the trap of the Rokujō.
You can't move.
You are ensnared in the crystal, glowing threads, struggling within them, fading away as the filthiest woman on this world.
This is my revenge.
He forgot the promise we made.
Wretched women like you are insolent enough to lure him away from me.
You leashed him firmly, pulling all sorts of strings to prevent me from approaching him.
Thus, I have the right to strangle all the wretched, filthy women in this world to death.
And at the moment when you cease to breathe, I shall sneer at you, you who looked down on me and assumed I was harmless, and I shall say.

You are the one I truly despised.

◇ ◇ ◇

(Well, whatever, I won't be getting Akagi's love.)
One had to wonder how many times Honoka deleted Koremitsu's messages, and she nervously strolled alone down the bustling street in the middle of the night. She was wearing glasses, her hair tied into twin ponytails.
She was to meet the 'Poppy' at the alley in front of her.
She gave herself the codename Heliotrope, for even though Koremitsu was annoyed with her, she wanted to be his Heliotrope.
Surely, she did such a reckless action because of Koremitsu Akagi.
If not, she would not have thought of doing the dirty work of heading to such a dim street to buy drugs.
Surely she would be expelled if the school was to know about it. There were a few members of the Yakuza waiting over there, holding drugs. Not all of them were dealing drugs.
Honoka knew that she would be in danger, but she wanted to affirm if the 'Poppy' was Yū. If Yū was indeed the drug dealer, she would have to convince her to stop.
If possible, she wanted to end this before Koremitsu found out—
(I know that it's just me being selfish and trying to satisfy myself. Even so, I don't want to see Akagi suffer, and this is something I have to do…)

—What were you doing, Shikibu?

After school, Koremitsu glared at Honoka fiercely, interrogating her with a terrifying howl.

—You weren't paying a visit at the hospital when I met you there. Stop trying to bluff me. Say it!!

Koremitsu was infuriated that Honoka was spying on Yū.
Perhaps the crazy messages that were circulated in school were sent by her.
It was said that Hiina of the news club fell from the stairs due to the work of a vengeful spirit, and was taken away by ambulance, so she ran off the stairs where Hiina fell from.
She then found Koremitsu looking grim, a heinous atmosphere surrounding him, and he stormed agitatedly towards her, grabbing her arm, interrogating,
“Your bracelet, what happened to it?”
Once Honoka said that she dropped it, Koremitsu followed up by asking where did she drop it, his other hand handing it over to her.
It was the exact same bracelet as the one she dropped.
—“This is mine…!? You picked it?”
—“Yeah, on these stairs.”
At first, she did not understand his intent at all.
However,
Maybe he’s suspecting if I pushed Oumi down? Once she had this realization, she was utterly furious, and it was most probable that she felt as ashamed as she was furious.
Why will I do such a thing!? Akagi’s doubting whatever I do here! Does he have no confidence in me at all?
She was peeved and shamed, the furor exploding in her mind.
She grumbled, “Why must I be yelled at by you!?” , and Koremitsu yelled back “I’m worried about you!!”
Koremitsu’s eyes conveyed an intense, stern feeling that pierced through Honoka’s eyes.
(Ahh, Akagi’s really worried for my safety. That’s why he’s so angry at me.)
Honoka realized it,
And thus, she inadvertently felt depressed about it.
Her nose buzzed, and she looked ready to break down in tears, but if she did, Koremitsu would be left flustered, and would give his utmost to help her.
But even if it was such an arduous thing to do, even though he was completely battered, Koremitsu would treat her just as he treated the other girls.
However, that was what she really hated.
She really hated herself from showing her weakness to others, and she would not allow herself to do it. If she were to, Honoka would not be Koremitsu’s Heliotrope anymore.
Koremitsu probably would not have thought of Honoka as the reliable Heliotrope anymore.
(I really decided to be Akagi’s Heliotrope.)

She already made up her mind once she revealed on her website that she was actually not a love expert at all.
Even if this love was never to blossom, she would continue to persist.
She wanted to continue being the sturdy, cheerful purple flower Koremitsu cannot live without with.
Koremitsu was dumbfounded as she exclaimed that she did not need his help anymore.

—"There's no way you can protect two at once!"

After saying that, her heart was again pierced once she wondered if he was hurt as a result.
She could not look at his face directly, and ran down the stairs.
(I love Akagi.)
She was hopelessly in love with him, and she really, really, really loved him.
(But Akagi's favorite isn't me.)
Boys typically flock towards those weaker girls who gave off the need for protections.
(Akagi surely won't end up liking people like me.)
But even so, she wanted to be involved with him.
She did all she could for Koremitsu's sake.
(Even if we can't be lovers…I hope to at least be a Heliotrope that can help you.)
She went to the back of an old building down the street, and it was a stark contrast to the clear, bright street outside, being a path that was dark and empty, devoid of people.
One would get the feeling of a ghost appearing there.
Honoka did not believe in superstitions, and was not afraid of ghosts.
However, the damaged building windows were rattling due to the wind, and there was a phantom hand reaching between the gap of the two buildings, grabbing her neck, causing her to feel goosebumps.
(There aren't any ghosts at all.)
She said as she entered deeper into the alley. Whenever the rustle of the leaf grazed her neck, she would shiver in fear.
(Where's the Poppy at all?)
She gripped the cellphone in her hand firmly.
At this moment, there was some dim light shining from the road outside, a slender female figure appeared in front of her.
It was a slender body, a pale head.
Long hair draping down.
Dressed in a skirt, holding a crimson bouquet of flowers called the Poppy.

(Miss Kanai…!)

The appearance of Yū Kanai, ever the fleeting figure who stood by

Koremitsu, sheltered by the latter, overlapped with the woman holding the bouquet of crimson flowers, and she was startled.
At that moment, the herm of the skirt and the fluffy long hair turned, and the
‘Poppy’ escaped.
“Wait!”
She hurriedly fished out the cellphone to take photos, and began to give chase after the ‘Poppy’.
(Did she find me? Is the ‘Poppy’ Miss Kanai after all!?)
The ponytails behind the head swayed violently, and once the glasses slipped, Honoka threw it aside, giving chase as she held the phone with one hand and she pressed the camera shutter.
The crimson flowers the ‘Poppy’ held was scattered, and she dashed off to an alley deep within the darkness within the cluster of buildings. Finally, she ran down to the basement of a 4 level building.
Honoka too dashed down the stairs.
Her footsteps echoed along with the ‘Poppy’s, and she heard the sound of a door opening and closing.
The ‘Poppy’ had reached the level below, and had vanished without a trace.Honoka nudged aside a heavy metal door, and entered the basement, finding it completely pitch dark.
(Miss Kanai…where are you?)
She cautiously entered by using the light from the cellphone, and the crimson flowers from before suddenly appeared.
There was probably a light inside the bouquet. The thin, translucent petals that covered the stems became a lamp, as dim as a flickering, burning candle, swaying away.
“Are you in there?”
Feeling completely tense, she approached the flowers.
Once her eyes got used to the darkness, she could at least see who was the one holding the flowers.
A slender body, with long wavy hair.
“Miss Kanai…?”
Honoka’s voice echoed from the icy walls, only to have something powdery thrown at her face out of a sudden.
“!”
The numbing fragrance entered her nose, and she was left coughing helplessly. While she snivel and coughed with teary eyes, it appeared the other party ran out of the basement.
As the bouquet was thrown aside, the crimson flowers spread in the darkness, scattered all over the flower. She heard the door being shut, and though she kept coughing, she continued yelling,
“Miss Kanai! Listen to me! I won’t tell Akagi or anyone else that you’re selling drugs! I’m willing to delete the photos I have if you will stop! So—”

Her head got dizzy, probably due to the powder kicking on. She stumbled to the door, but could not open it.
The door was locked from the outside?
She felt chilly within, and at the same time, blue smoke came through the gap in the door.
A sweet fragrance.
The same scent as the powder she was thrown with!
(I can't breathe it in!)
She instinctively realized, and held her breath, trying to pry the door open, but no matter how she tried to turn the handle, push or kick at it, the door would not budge.
"Miss Kanai! Please open the door! Miss Kanai!"
No matter how much she yelled, there was no response. She did not know whether there was anyone opposite. Perhaps the other party had already left for quite a while.
(Got to call the police—)
She fished out the phone from her pocket. Even in the darkness, she was familiar with the positions of the buttons, and she could input the characters accurately without looking.
The moment she began however, she suddenly stopped.
(If the police come, Miss Kanai will be arrested.)
At the very least, they would question her on what actually happened. Even if Honoka did not mention, the former would be investigated as the Poppy, and the potential drug trade would be looked into.
Honoka's fingers stopped on the button.
(What do I do? I have to to get out of here. But how?)
She made use of the light from the cellphone to wander around the room, looking for other exits, if there was anything to unlock the room.
It appeared that this basement was abandoned, and there was a lot of broken items scattered all over the floor, such that one had to wonder how many times she tripped over those items.
Just when she was at a loss on what to do, a sweet scent drifted in from between the gap of the door, filling the entire room, and she was left faint and limp.
She lost her poised decision making ability, anxiety rose in her head.
Once she heard the sound of fire burning outside the door, she was shocked.
(You're kidding…a fire!?)
She hurried off to the door.)
She held the handle, and the sharp heat caused her to relax her hand.
"!!"
She hurriedly retreated, and the phone on her other hand dropped off.
A fire blazed on the other side of the door.
Honoka bent down to pick her phone up, breathing in some of the sweet smoke drifting between the door, and collapsed onto the floor.

She kept coughing, the scenery in front of her swirling.
(Where's my phone?)
She tried to reach her hand out, only to collapse weakly.
Her heart was pounding so fast it seemed she just went through a track meet, and her head got increasingly tense. A gong rang at her eyes, and the building was swirling around.
(I can't find my phone.)
The temperature of the icy floor was gradually increasing. If this was to keep up, she would probably be burned to death
(I never got to date a guy)
Her personal Purple Princess website was filled with lots of love stories, but she secretly admired those that could kiss their boyfriends on the ferris wheel in a theme park, hold hands and watch the stars at the coast while the moonlight shone upon them, those that would book a karaoke box with their flustered boyfriends, making them sing love songs, and wanting to sing another one for them.
From the moment she got interested in Koremitsu, whenever she had an idea of the date, the idealized partner would be him.
(I-I've only been to the pool and karaoke with Akagi. I never did go to a theme park, an aquarium, a zoo, a game center, a seaside, skiing or anything like that.)
At this point, she was curled up, coughing away, unable to move. *What am I thinking of right now?* she was still peeved at herself for being so carefree, and looked ready to burst into tears at any given moment.
(There's no way I have a chance to kiss Akagi on the Ferris Wheel or something.)
Akagi likes girls who are completely different from me, and that will remain the same.
(But Akagi, I like you.)
She loved his determined eyes.
She loved his rigid, yet earnest words.
She loved his roar, and his stammer whenever he got flustered.
She loved his stiff, yet cheerful 'Yo' whenever he greeted her.
She loved his bony hands, and even the way he raised his eyebrows, give that cringed face, and remained silent.
No matter who Koremitsu loved at this point, Honoka could not contain her deep love for him.
(Akagi's really a bad person. Whenever I want to resist him thinking 'what kind of joke is this? What is it about him that I like?' he always shows me that cool side of his.)

—I'll protect you!

The first time she felt interest in him was when she first heard those word, when she saw Koremitsu giving her a grim look.

Once she knew this man was different from others, Honoka gradually gravitated towards him.

—“I haven’t forgotten, Shikibu. About you saying you like me.

—“I don’t really know what sort of feeling this is,”

—“And even though you asked whether you can like me, I still can’t answer it now, but I’ll definitely find an answer!”

—S-so-so anyway, can you please wait for just a little?”

It was the end of summer vacation, on that night when everyone was gathered at the riverbank. Back then, Koremitsu stared at Honoka, his face blushing as he said this.
I’ll definitely find an answer, so anyway, can you please wait for just a little?
Honoka’s cheeks were flushed, and she nodded.

—Y-yes.

It was an important promise.
Koremitsu definitely would not lie about it. Thus, he would not let Honoka’s confession come to pass for nothing, and he definitely would give her a response.
No matter the final outcome, Honoka was delighted that Koremitsu was willing to think about her. Once she heard that she had to wait, her heart began to throb.
(I’ve yet to hear Akagi’s answer. No, I don’t want to die yet. Not yet! I can’t die like this without hearing his answer.)
Suddenly, an intense melody rang in the darkness.
It was the passionate love song from her favorite band.
The ring tone indicating Koremitsu!
With her utmost, Honoka reached her hand out to the source of the melody. Her fingertips touched them, and once she received the call, she heard Koremitsu’s voice.
“You finally picked it up, damn it! Where are you right now!?”
Once she heard Koremitsu bellowing, Honoka’s chest was filled with agitation.
“I-I’m in the basement…A-Akagi. There’s a fire.”
She could no longer think. She reported on her position, and it appeared Koremitsu could tell that Honoka was in a critical situation.
“I’m going over now! Hang in there!”
He encouraged.
“Akagi, my confession, give me a reply.”
“Huh?”

“Give me a reply now.”
“Wh-what are you saying?”
“I-I can’t wait anymore. I may be burned to death before you even get here.”
“You idiot! Don’t die now!”
“I definitely won’t be able to ascend to the afterlife if I don’t hear your answer.”
“Who allowed you to die? Stop thinking such nonsense now and live on!”
“Yeah! Live on! So tell me right now! I’ll possess you if I become a ghost without hearing your answer, Akagi~~! I don’t want to do such an indecent thing!”
“If you are to haunt me as well, what am I to do?”
“So give me a response!”
She wanted to be dumped before she departed.
With that, she would leave her mortal life without regrets.”
“Seriously, you are the classmate who just so happened to sit beside me!! You aren’t my love interest!!!!”
Honoka yelled as she placed her ear on the phone.
Suddenly, the door opened.
The smoke came roaming in.
Standing on the other side was a panting Koremitsu, his face completely contorted.
After that, he yelled at Honoka, the latter still dumbfounded.
“You’re one huge idiot!! Honoka Shikibu is not an ordinary classmate to me!!! She’s a woman I like!!!!”
◇ ◇ ◇
Honoka Shikibu is not an ordinary classmate to me!!! She’s a woman I like!!!! Koremitsu yelled the moment the door was opened.
His heart was pounding furiously from the moment he dashed through the ticket gantry till the moment he found this room in the basement.
Please be safe He prayed quietly as he darted through the crowd, putting his phone at his ear. Even after he managed to get through however, she demanded a confession from him. He was shocked and furious, almost crushing the phone in his hand.
(What are you thinking when your life’s on the line, you idiot! You say that you’ll haunt me as a ghost? Hikaru alone is enough to cause me much trouble! If you’re going to come into the bathroom with me, what am I to do!?)
I definitely won’t let you die!
Thanks to Honoka’s interrupted words, he dashed down the stairs leading to the basement, and found an abnormal situation in front of him, one beyond expectations.
There was a censer in front of the door, and sweet smoke and flames rose from there. The door was already scalding, and a burning pain permeated

through his body the moment his skin touched it. However, he did not care as he turned the knob, and pushed the door down.
I worked so hard at such a crucial moment; breathing this is—he grimaced, his mind about to melt. Honoka however shouted, <em<Seriously, you are the classmate who just so happened to sit beside me!! You aren't my love interest!!!!
You're really a troublesome woman! A dolt of a woman!
You aren't just some ordinary woman! If you're just an ordinary classmate, why am I being so heartbroken!?
She was always like this. She never held back when she talk, and suddenly, she told him *"I think I like you"* , and then she blushed, following it up with *"like, not love!"* , and never gave him a chance to answer.
After that, she kicked Koremitsu, having assumed he was a lolicon. To correct his lolicon tendencies, as she said, she proceeded to read some gravure magazines in a karaoke box with him.
And there was the moment when she suddenly appeared at Koremitsu's corridor.
The time when the duo sneaked into the school pool in the middle of the night, when she placed her head at his chest in a bashful manner, sweetly asking,
"You better protect me, okay?"
That caused his heart to throb. After that, when they met in the library, she said
"…I think it's better for us to see each other less often."
But when she was at Koremitsu's house.
"I-is it alright that…I find myself liking you?"
The way she lifted her head bitterly to look at him caused his heart to throb.
Koremitsu had always caused trouble for her, always needing her help. However, his heart kept pounding whether he got her involved. Her words and actions were always so ludicrous that he could not understand, let alone think about it.
There was no woman as troublesome as she was.
If they were just mere classmates, he would have kept his distance without saying another word.
The reason why he never did so however was that she was no ordinary classmate to him.

—"Yeah, if there's only one person in the entire school I'll choose to trust, that'll be her. It's that kind of trust."

The words he said to Hikaru were not a lie.
He trusted Honoka.
It was neither a boast nor a wish. Looking at Honoka's utmost efforts, Koremitsu gradually realized that the goodwill she showed her never changed in the slightest.

—“I’m your Heliotrope after all.”

Honoka had a cheerful face, candor tone, and blabbermouth of a tongue.
That appeared to be for granted.
Yū herself did call Honoka ‘Mr Akagi’s Heliotrope’.
And when he thought about it, while all his interactions with the other girls were due to the promises Hikaru had to fulfill, Honoka was the only one different.
He recruited Honoka for assistance to understand Aoi’s true feelings, but Honoka was not one of Hikaru’s flowers.
She willingly approached Koremitsu, and she was the one who got down to interact with him verbally, a wildflower who bloomed for no one.
Then, she became Koremitsu’s Heliotrope.
She did her best to help Koremitsu, to support him, and finally fell in love with him.

—I think I like you.

He could not forget.
That was the one actual confession Koremitsu received.
Honoka was the first to love Koremitsu, the one shunned by everyone else.
She did not love Koremitsu for being Hikaru’s representative, but for how Koremitsu was.
That was why there was no way he could forget about it!
That was why they were no mere classmates!
Before he got to this place, Koremitsu kept recalling the words he read on Honoka’s webpage in the train, all the efforts she put in for his sake, the times they were together. While being in such dire stress, he vented all his restrained emotions with gusto,

“Honoka Shikibu is not an ordinary classmate to me!!! She’s a woman I like!!!!”

Having witnessed Koremitsu’s new hairstyle for the first time, Honoka, still sprawled on the floor, looked up at him.
He grabbed her arm, and stormed off.
However, the entrance was blocked. They could not get out.
“Damn it!”
While he cussed, Hikaru said,
“Koremitsu, there is a fire hose at the wall.”
Koremitsu turned to where Hikaru was pointing, and had a closer look. He was unable to see it clearly however, as it was probably too dark.
“Over here! Hurry!”
Koremitsu followed Hikaru’s lead,

“Wait for me.”
He let go of Honoka’s arm, raised the fire hose, and grabbed it without a second thought. He held the lever, pointed the hose at the fire, and the foam proceeded to extinguish.
The foam mixed with the fire, and after a while, the fire was finally weakened, only extinguished completely when the fire was completely put out.
“Haa…”
“Thank goodness.”
Koremitsu then scaled the narrow staircase, dragging the lifeless Honoka with him.
Honoka’s feet were already unstable, but she still wanted to push him aside.
“Enough alright. Just lean on me!”
Having said that, he grabbed Honoka by the shoulder and pulled her over.
Though she was weeping, Honoka continued to put up a facade.
“Wh-what’s with that…why, did you save me—I told you I don’t need your protection. You idiot, idiot…idiot.”
It seemed there was such a scene before…Koremitsu’s heart was suddenly griped.
It was after he had a kiss with Tsuyako in the garden party.
At the backyard of the school, Honoka wailed as she slammed at Koremitsu’s chest.

—Idiot, idiot…idiot.

He recalled the bittersweet feeling of Honoka sobbing and flailing her fists weakly at his chest.
Like before, her hands and hair were resting on him, her breathing beating down on his throat and face, her trickling tears gradually dampening Koremitsu’s shirt.
And just like before, he was shocked by Honoka’s petite shoulders.
“You’re the big idiot here. Why didn’t you hurry up and call me for help?”
“Th-that’s because…”
“You’re definitely thinking that if the police knows that Yū’s selling drugs, things will get complicated, right?”
Once he said this,
“Ugh.”
Honoka, stammering away, was left speechless.
“I guess that’s it. The reason why you tailed Yū is because you got evidence that Yū’s the ‘Poppy’, right?”
“…”
Honoka averted her eyes, pouting, and remained silent
“Why didn’t you tell me?”
“…”
“You think I’ll falter because of that?”

"…"
Honoka's shoulders shook a little. She worriedly lifted her head at him, hesitant to speak.
That was the answer.
He already knew of Honoka's intentions the moment he browsed through that personal website.
Everything was for Koremitsu's sake.

—Just like you, she's the type who wants to protect others.

Right.
This girl here is definitely like me.
They were similar in how they had the heart to protect each other, how they worked so hard that they failed, how they kept ignoring their surroundings as they kept moving forward with zest, and even how they remained morose.
Honoka kept her lips sealed, and that clumsy sight of her dour self caused Koremitsu to feel love for her.
"You said that I don't have to protect you…but I want to. I can't leave you alone when I know that you're in danger."
He immediately conveyed his feelings.
Yes, he wanted to protect.
It did not matter whether Honoka was weak or strong.
It was because it was Honoka that he wanted to protect her.
Honoka's face was contorted, her eyes again glittering, and she chided him, "I say, why must you keep saying such things…y-you just said that you like me. That's a lie. I won't be haunting you as a vengeful ghost even if you do tell me that you don't have any feelings for me."
"I say, it's not like I don't have any thoughts at all?"
Why did she remain this obstinate even at this point? Did she still think Koremitsu did not love her.
Even on her personal website, she ranted about how he never thought of her as a girl, how she would have an unrequited love, how she kept swiveling on the chair—
But even so, didn't you provide lots of love advice, Purple Princess? Argh, you aren't a Love Expert after all. I'm completely fooled by you.
If I don't clarify things now, this stupid woman won't understand.
Feeling completely vexex, Koremitsu declared solemnly,

"I like you, Shikibu Honoka!"

He tried to repeat himself, but this girl falling in love with Koremitsu for the first time, let alone a love expert, had yet to completely understand what was going on. There seemed to be something probing her chest, as Koremitsu proceeded to embrace Honoka.

Honoka's body froze for a while, and remained in Koremitsu's clutches, unwilling to part.
And then, with a choking voice, she said,
"I'm so happy I can die right now."
"You idiot. I won't let you die like that."
Love gradually aroused in them as they embraced each other with increasing might. The stench of sweat could be scented upon, and their heartbeats could practically be heard, the sounds beating in harmony—
At this moment,
"Erm, Koremitsu, I know this is a critical situation where we finally made it out of a crisis, and I do know that I am being a hinderance here, but I suppose we should be leaving here. A love scene in a night alley is probably a little too much for you to handle."
"!"
Koremitsu abruptly released his hands from Honoka.
Koremitsu could only watch on wryly.
"A-Akagi…"
Why did you let go so suddenly? Honoka stared at Koremitsu unhappily. If Koremitsu was to give a dodgy excuse, Honoka would misinterpret it as him not liking her in one bit, and would give him a flying kick.
Feeling fidgety, Koremitsu racked his brain for an answer.
"Speaking of which, erm…why did you think Yū was the drug dealer?"
No matter how tense Honoka was, surely she would not have suspected others for no proper reason? There definitely had to be be something.
Honoka suddenly scowled, remaining silent and somewhat hesitant.
"Yū's not the drug dealer. Tell me all you know."
Once Koremitsu said that, Honoka finally spoke.
"I got a message saying that Miss Kanai's selling drugs."
"A message?"
As expected, Honoka received a message from the Poppy. Who was the person, and for what purpose, did she do such a thing.
While Koremitsu looked on grimly, Hikaru noted,
"I suppose Miss Shikibu did take a few photos of Yū before this. There should be a photo of that person who arranged for Yū's return, no?"
"Hey, show me the photos you took."
Honoka handed her cellphone over to Koremitsu with a stoic face.
He opened a folder titled 'Kanai', and the photos were displayed one by one.
There was Yū holding the bouquet of Poppies in her hand, riding on a car, entering a serene looking isolated house.
From there on—
Koremitsu stopped his hand from flipping to the next image.
"…!"
Hikaru too watched on with a stiffened face.
Shown on Honoka's screen was a genial, bespectacled youth with frail shoulders.

Chapter 7

“I have returned~ Third Princess.”

Kazuaki returned to the mansion that was meant for his private time, and stated this triumphantly the moment he pushed the doors of the living room aside.

A grin appeared on his red lips, the soft long hair with slight curls,and the hem of the skirt swayed gently as he strode forth in a dancing manner, sticking his face on the cage as he chuckled in delight.

The chameleon in the cage stuck its tongue out with a stoic expression.

“I did it! I tricked that Honoka Shikibu who is on good terms with Koremitsu Akagi and locked her in the basement. She thought I was Yū Kanai, shouting at me “Miss Kanai! Miss Kanai~!”. Ha, how funny is that? I lit the incense there, and now she might be having hallucinations of seeing Yū Kanai. Honoka Shikibu might have hallucinations of killing Yū Kanai here? Either way, I really am looking forward to seeing such things happen in the real world, Third Princess~”

He brought his cheeks to the cage for the umpteenth time, brought out the cricket feed, and the chameleon instantly feasted upon them before they could scatter.

Mesmerized by everything, Kazuaki spoke with a sweet voice,

“I was really shocked that Honoka Shikibu was wandering around the place where the deal was supposed to go through, and really shocked that she entered the chat room. If Koremitsu Akagi is to know that Honoka Shikibu was locked in the basement by Yū Kanai, he will definitely be feeling upset. I suppose I should enjoy the sight of her being intoxicated, and call in a report the following morning. What a perfect victory, Third Princess!”

He leisurely spun around, the hem of his skirt swaying.

He looked at himself in the mirror.

“Hm, this hairstyle is pretty rough too.”

He scowled.

“The curls on the hair really do not feel nice, and the light brown color really looks ugly…Hikaru and Koremitsu Akagi really have bad tastes to be infatuated with women of such hair colors.”

He noted with spite, took off the wig with those little curls, and put on the wig with the long black hair he liked.

He saw the black, glossy hair draped down his slender shoulders to his waist, and his fingers felt an icy sensation; upon this, he finally showed a satisfied smile.

“You see? I am prettier than they are. Hey, do you not feel this way too, Third Princess?”

Kazuaki lit his favorite incense, and the sweet aroma spread in the room, agitating his heart further.

“Black hair go well with women all, and it has to be long black hair. Those sluts with their brown hair permed into curls can just die for all I care. It will be great if Yū Kanai is told off by Koremitsu Akagi ‘you are a whore of a

non-virgin', take up the chopper, cut her arm off and kill herself. Koremitsu Akagi will go crazy as well."
The reason why he approached Yū while the latter was in Australia with her mother was so that he could get his revenge on Koremitsu.
Through his investigations, he found that Koremitsu had feelings for Yū, who was one of Hikaru's lovers.
Kazuaki first obtained her Yū, and convinced her.
His voice was similar to Hikaru's, and by speaking to her with that voice, and showing that usual harmless, tender face, he was able to obtain her.
That was why he called her a frivolous non-virgin.
She talked to a man she was unfamiliar with, looking so cheerful, but she was so deplorable, she basically spread her buttocks wide, telling him to enjoy.
But while he was secretly resenting her, on the surface, he pretended to be an ordinary, honest, kind-hearted older brother to Hikaru, and managed to lure Yū to Japan successfully.
Then he let her be reunited with Koremitsu, to allow them to feel the sweetness back then.
"Please do not mention about me to Mr. Akagi."
But at the same time, he sealed off Yū's lips.
"He probably will not be happy to see his girlfriend being on good terms with another boy. There is no need to do anything that could cause a misunderstanding."
While his tone was cheery at first, starting from the middle,
"I will be misunderstood by Mr. Akagi. He will hate me. There is no one around me that I can trust."
He plotted to seek Yū's sympathy.

"As I expected, women can be calculative in some ways, but they are fools after all. They are fooled so easily after all~!!"
He had been despising the creatures called women for quite a long while.
Kazuaki, raised as the lone son of the Mikados' head wife, was told from a very young age that he was to continue the family corporation as he was the oldest son. His mother, infamous for her impatient personality, would lash out at the people around them every day.
She said that she wanted pancakes, but when others served it to her on a platter, she would angrily declare that it would be fattening because it was covered with butter and syrup. She yapped that those troublesome picnics should be cancelled, hoping that they would rain, but when it actually did, she lashed out, saying that she finally bought a new dress, and the heavens would not let her wear!
With regards to Kazuaki, attaining good grades alone was not enough for her.
She kept teaching him how to order others around, but she was infuriated when he let his classmates copy his homework. If Kazuaki's grades were to

slide in the slightest, she would rage at him for being so incompetent, that she could not put on a good face in front of others. Kazuaki's personal tutors too had textbooks, set squares and compasses thrown at them.

Women are unreasonable.
Women are too stubborn.

To sum it all up, it was because they were women.
Kazuaki's fiancee was utterly terrified of him whenever they met, and it really infuriated him. However, as they were relatives, Tsuyako's appearance was strikingly similar to Kazuaki's mother, and the splendid red hair reminded of Kazuaki of his mother, who would head to a member salon to dye her hair in such an unnatural manner. This further incensed him.
Little Tsuyako is so introverted, always wailing away, cannot make a proper greeting, always making mistakes when she dances, always unable to please me. Is she forgiven because she is a girl? Why is it that I am the one who always gets scolded by mother."
I hate women.
It is too despicable of them to be wearing such pretty red dresses without putting in much effort.
I am more suited than Tsuyako to wear them.
I cannot have cute clothing and toys because I am a boy.
I prefer women clothing.
I prefer girly colors
I do not want to be a boy!

That was the moment when he learned of a shrine hidden in Tsuyako's garden, one dedicated to the 'Rokujō'.
Legend had it that she was a terrifying transformed into a spider during the Heian era, and devoured her husband and the mistress.
Kazuaki was not terrified in the least when he heard of that rumor.
Instead, 'Rokujō' was thought to be purging those filthy women, and he admired her.
The dazzling, terrifying, cruel image of 'Rokujō formed in his heart. His cheeks seared, and he prayed that if he was to be born a girl, he wished to be a woman like 'Rokujō'.
Kazuaki's mother was one of the Udates.
Kazuaki had the blood of the Udates within him.
Ever since then, Kazuaki would feel jumpy whenever he touched the things he liked, the fluttering red skin, the long black wig, the sweet perfume. It seemed there were voices in his ears, *You accepted me, and shall become one with me. Now that you have obtained the spider's power, you can exact your vengeance on those filthy women.*
The first time he put on the red skirt, he stared blankly at the alluring figure shown on the mirror, and inadvertently brought his face close to it.

Why, this dress suits me much better than it does to Tsuyako.
*Yes, yes, yes—**I** am more suited for this.*
Ever since then, he kept snatching Tsuyako's clothes, stealthy stole the clothes from his mother's wardrobe, and stood in front of the mirror, looking at how cute he was.
He wanted others to marvel at his beauty, and he wanted the praise of others, but that was a wish taht would never be granted.
Whenever he saw his little brother Hikaru, how the latter was cuter than the girls, such an innocent gentle.
Whenever he saw that smile, he felt his heart punctured.
"You are not allowed to talk."
Kazuaki's mother had completely abandoned Hikaru. That is not a person meant to be born on this world. He is the child of a demon, born of the filthiest person in this world..
But Hikaru looked to be shone upon by the clear sun in front of him. His face showed a sanguinic smile that surpassed that of a child, one Kazuaki had never seen before. Kazuaki felt that he was purified just by looking at Hikaru.
Hikaru was always looking at the other girls, never once looking Kazuaki's direction.
But on a party on a certain day, Kazuaki wore the clothing he stole from Tsuyako, and approached Hikaru while crossdressed.
Hikaru smiled, and held Kazuaki by the hand.
"The Tulips I grew have bloomed. They are pretty. Let us look at them."
Just when Hikaru was about to drag Kazuaki along, the latter said,
"I have to go now."
And let go of the hand.
"Well then, let us play together next time."
Hikaru did a pinky swear.
That Hikaru is a fool, so easily bluffed. —but at the following meeting, Hikaru never once looked at Kazuaki, then dressed in male clothing.
Kazuaki was vengeful.
No matter how many years passed, he still could not forget the initial grief he felt back then. Whenever Hikaru was surrounded by women, Kazuaki would be utterly livid.
I am prettier than any of the other flowers you have when I put on the dress. I should be the one!
Why is it that Hikaru cannot realize it
Why is he not spending time with me? Why is he wasting his time with those filthy women!?
He was livid, spiteful, so much that he was suffocated.
Hikaru died because he interacted with those filthy women. And because he did, he got sullied like them. Those women killed Hikaru.
But even after Hikaru died, there was the wretched hound called Koremitsu Akagi going around, saving those women.

Kazuaki wished for all that Hikaru left behind to be completely eradicated. He wanted to be a women to purge those ugly, filthy women, just as Rokujō did when she devoured the wretched mistress. He wanted to isolate the women Hikaru loved—especially the most beloved, and shatter them.
That was his vengeance upon Hikaru for not knowing his actual identity until the very end, and did not fulfill that promise.
The vengeance on Koremitsu for shaming him—
First, he wanted to use Yū Kanai to crush Koremitsu, the eyesore to him.
Then, he would snatch Hikaru's child from the 'most beloved', and raise him up, such that he would only have eyes for Kazuaki, that he would love Kazuaki alone.
"Great if he is born a boy. If a girl, I shall have her undergo a sex change."
While he was daydreaming as he held the chameleon cage.

"You're still that perverted bastard with those damned intentions."
♢ ♢ ♢
Koremitsu stood at the center of the living room, glaring at Kazuaki Mikado —Hikaru's half brother, with a furious, condescending glare.
Kazuaki lifted his head.
The sweet scent, black hair, white face, silky shoulders, flat chest, slender waist were all giving off an alluring vibe.
It was the first time Koremitsu saw Kazuaki dressed in female clothing so brazenly, but it was chilling how much he looked like a 'woman'.
Leaving aside the body, there was the long, narrow eyes, the red lips that were pouted petulantly, the musky atmosphere. It felt as if the blacks of a woman was taken down and assembled as a human.
Kazuaki narrowed his eyes at Koremitsu—and then looked over at Yū, who was shriveled by the side. After doing so, his lips slowly opened.
He straightened his body, showing an alluring smile—the smile of a 'woman'.
Yū gasped.
Hikaru stood behind her, ostensibly trying to support her as he watched his half-brother tensely.
Kazuaki spoke with the voice that was strikingly similar to Hikaru.
"Ah yes, I did give Yū the card key."
Yū's shoulders again shivered, her fleeting eyes showing fear.
Koremitsu returned to the hospital where Yū was, and admitted Honoka as a patient. It was Yū who requested to follow Koremitsu to Kazuaki.
This was too much for Yū after all, and Koremitsu immediately felt regretful. She was fooled by someone she trusted, and that person was smiling demurely at her while crossdressed.
Kazuaki's lips curled increasingly, his eyes reprimanding as he slowly continued,
"You are unexpectedly brazen to bring a man into my room. Ah, well, there is nothing to be shocked about. You are that kind of person after all, Yū. In

any case, you were the one smiling away and skipped classes to come back to Japan with me. I was the one who paid for the flight and accommodation."
"I, did not…"
Yū's face froze as she whispered back in defiance.
Koremitsu raised his eyebrow, and right when he was about to growl, Kazuaki shot him a condescending look as he scanned the former from head to toe, before looking at the chin.
"Hey, Mr Akagi, this Yū whom you love is this kind of a woman. Your illusions have been shattered, no? I really do want to wish that Yū is arrested as a criminal and corrected, but it is a pity that events were revealed a tad too early."
"!!"
A voice came from Koremitsu's throat.
It was the first time he was so furious that the voice came out. Clearly it showed how this man in front of him, no, this 'woman' really infuriated.
Kazuaki did not shut up, perhaps having realized the fury surrounding Koremitsu.
The chameleon in the cage maintained its stoic face as it stuck its tongue out.
"Well, listen up then! The fact remains that Yū imported drugs and sold them to earn pocket change. The female drug dealer holding the Poppies has been becoming quite popular on some improper websites out there. How do you feel seeing your favorite girl becoming famous? Huh~!!!"
(I really want to murder this guy!)
Koremitsu wanted to kick Kazuaki down, grab the neck, and smash him. There was a tremendous killing intent in his rage.
Luring out the violent beast in Koremitsu's heart were Kazuaki's eyes, voice, and the sweet scent lingering in the room. Just when Koremitsu was overwhelmed by a dangerous impulse.

"The one who sold the drugs was not Yū, but you, Mr Kazuaki!"

Hikaru, standing behind Yū, spoke with a clear voice that struck through the heinous atmosphere.
That expression and voice was devoid of hesitation, and Koremitsu regained his composure, yelling,

"That was you!"

"Poppies are no longer in the Japanese market, and there is no way any shop will sell them. If it is you however, Mr Kazuaki, you can import them by air, or grow time in the breeding nursery under the Mikados conglomerate. There is no way Yū is able to do all this."

“Poppies only bloom in Japan during November, right? There’s no way she has any means of obtaining them unless you gave her those flowers!”

At first, there was a bouquet left on the sofa .
After that, there were thin, crimson petals scattered on the floor when Koremitsu visited Yū again.
Following that, on the night he received the ominous message, there was the drug he found in the Poppy bouquet that was placed on the sofa.
It was then that he suspected Yū for the first time based on the computer browser history that indicated the deals.
Yū was merely requested by Kazuaki to hold the bouquet of Poppies and visit the old folks homes as a volunteer.
And during that time, Kazuaki put on the red lipstick, wearing a skirt, wandering around leerily, doing whatever he wanted.

“Mr Kazuaki hates Koremitsu because of the incident involving Miss Aoi. He wanted revenge, so he approached Yū, brought her back to Japan, and made her a criminal.”

“You pretended to be goody-goody and lured Yū back, prepared the cutter on the door, the nails on the corridor, the umbrella with ink on it, and kept causing trouble for her in every way, and you kept sending me one message after another! That’s despicable of you! And now you planned to have Yū be a drug dealer?”

The residence of Kazuaki’s mother contained that forbidden shrine.
The woman who became a spider and devoured her husband and the mistress was sealed in there. That woman’s name was ‘Rokujō’; this was what
Koremitsu learned from Tsuyako.
The women of the Udates contained Rokujō’s blood.
And this slender, black-haired **woman**, sneering away bewitchingly with her red lips contorted, was the abomination of that spider.
Spitting out those fine threads the eyes could not see, weave its web, and hid itself, awaiting its prey to fall.

“In fact, the one who sold the drugs was Mr Kazuaki! The one who wore the wig and female clothing, holding that bouquet, pretending to be Yū was—”
“You’re the one who crossdressed and sold the drugs, you damned pervert!!!”
Koremitsu’s bellow echoed throughout the room. Both Hikaru and Koremitsu were glaring furious at the malicious long black hair called ‘Rokujō’.
The red hairs curled.
Showing delight, Kazuaki eked a venomous breath, saying,

“What are you saying now? I do not understand at all~.”
A malicious aura oozed from the hair that was as black as darkness itself.
“I do not have any impressions on the pin holders and the umbrella.~~~”
There was a sickening sweet trail at the end, and he narrows his eyes, pretending to be curious.
“Ahh~ however, it appears that girl at the hospital reception wants to be my lover, and has viewed as a love rival. Perhaps she was the one who did it. Well, Yū here appears to be easily bullied, always looking so honest and obedient. It is to be expected that she is to be maligned.~”
For the umpteenth time, Koremitsu’s rage hit the roof on this day.
What nonsense is this guy saying now!?
Why’s he still so shameless at this moment, playing dumb?
He’s blaming others for his own crimes
“That classmate of yours, Miss Shikibu, had been tailing Yū here with a scary face, Mr Akagi. However, their grudges do not have anything to do with me.”
Koremitsu again clenched his fists, and Yū paled as she stood by the side.
Upon seeing Yū widen her eyes with timidity, Koremitsu felt a deep pricking pain within him.
At the same time, his rage at Kazuaki was boiling.
“The photos Shikibu took has you crossdressing. You can’t say that you aren’t involved here.”
“But that is simply what it appears to you, no? That is because you do not wish to admit that Yū is the culprit. She is not that kind of woman you think of.”
“What did you say!?”
Yū too appeared to be on the verge of breaking into tears. The moment he swung his fist, Kazuaki narrowed his eyes curiously.
“It seemed Yū knew that Miss Shikibu learned that she was involved in drug dealing, and located her in the basement, and drugged her~”
“…I know. Shikibu’s now lying on the hospital bed. You drugged her, and nearly burned her alive.”
“Ehhh~ a fire too? I did not know at all.”
“!!! Yū was in the room the entire time when I went to Shikibu. She was on the way to do that volunteer work you told her to do, but went back to her room because she left something. Looking at the time, it’s not possible for Yū
to lock Shikibu. Also, Yū has the alibi of doing volunteer work all this time while you were going around doing your deals. I just need to get those old men to prove it, and those guys in the hospital would have seen Yū entering!”
Yes, there was a lot of evidence indicating that that Yū was not the Poppy, that Kazuaki was.
The situation at this point was highly disadvantageous to Kazuaki.
(But why’s he still being so calm at this point? While being that

crossdressing pervert wearing that wig and skirt.)
It felt that Koremitsu's group was the one pressured instead, and he felt anxious within.

"Well everyone, if you can prove it to me."

"Wha—"
While Koremitsu remained speechless, Hikaru spoke with disdain,
"It is impossible, Koremitsu. The old people and everyone else at the hospital must have been under Mr Kazuaki's command. That is how it is right now."
"They're all his goons!?"
Was that receptionist woman not the only subordinate working under Kazuaki? Was everyone involved with Yū under his watch?
Or perhaps to Kazuaki, the heir to the Mikados conglomerate, he was confident in his power to create false alibis from everyone involved?
What intimidated Koremitsu more than Kazuaki's words was that the latter showed absolutely no remorse over his despicable actions.
What's wrong with this guy's mental construct!?

"Did I not mentioned it before? I can be forgiven for whatever I do, you know~?"

Kazuaki glanced at his phone. That sickeningly sweet voice he spoke with was like a song.
"This here is data that proves the drug deals Yū did as the Poppy. What do you think will happen if I give it up?"
Hikaru gasped, and Yū's face froze.
Koremitsu too felt a chill in his heart.
(Kazuaki's phone doesn't contain any evidence. It's all fabricated. This liar. But what if the hospital guys and the old folks are sided with Kazuaki as he said._
Most would probably think of it as a photo of Yū holding a bouquet of crimson flowers, and perhaps she would be the target of much interest?
Could the delicate Yū actually handle this!? At this moment, Yū, standing right beside Koremitsu, had lost luster in her eyes.
Kazuaki raised the phone, and pressed his finger on the send button. Hikaru tried to snatch the phone away, but he just could not touch it.
"Okay then, let us upload it for the world to see."
"Stop ittt!!!!"
Koremitsu leapt at Kazuaki, toppling the incense burner that was oozing a sweet fragrance. The long, fine black hair swayed in the air like spider threads, scattering onto the floor in an alluring manner.

"Ah, I uploaded it."

Kazuaki, lying on the floor, pressed the button.
“!”
Koremitsu froze. Hikaru and Yū too remained rooted, looking tense.
The chameleon in the cage snapped its tongue, devouring the bug.
Kazuaki got up, sneering as he approached the table. He opened the computer placed on the table, and switched it on,
“Hey, come and look. See? This uploading site is really so popular at the moment~Ahh, how~~ great it is to be able to upload this here. Yū’s face should be rather clear here too—”
Kazuaki grinned as he had a look at the computer, but his expression suddenly changed.
It was a look of utter disbelief as he widened his eyes.
Koremitsu and Hikaru too had a glance at the screen, and were dumbfounded.
(What is…going on here?)
The computer screen clearly showed the photo of a woman holding crimson flowers.
The woman was wearing a skirt, her body looked delicate, and she had long, slightly permed brown hair.
White skin, little face.
Red lips.
Intriguing, mysterious eyes.
(…This isn’t Yū.)
Shown on the screen was a crossdressing Kazuaki!
“!!”
Kazuaki’s lips were shut, his eyes widened as he kept clicking the mouse, and new photos were shown.
The woman holding crimson flowers in this photo was all Kazuaki, and even the photos of him in usual male clothing were uploaded.
It seemed these photos were taken at a party held in a hotel hall. The bespectacled Kazuaki was dressed in a pricey suit, holding a glass of bubbling champagne, smiling genially.
“W-what in the! Why are my photos—! Yū’s photos are supposed to be uploaded instead!”
Kazuaki’s quivering fingers continued to click the mouse, his face increasingly contorted, large beads of sweat continued to fall, and his breathing was erratic.
An icy voice rang at this moment.

“What you uploaded is proof of your own misdeeds.”

His hair still messy, Kazuaki lifted his head agitatedly.

Koremitsu too looked over at the source of the voice.
The tall, intellectual beauty strolled into the room with her long hair swaying.
“Asa!”
Hikaru called out in surprise.
Koremitsu too widened his eyes.
“Saiga!”
That was followed by other voices,
“We have made arrangements with all parties. Even with you abusing the name of the Mikados, you have nowhere to go with the evidence laid out in front of you.”
Entering Koremitsu’s eyes was the poised, handsome face of Shungo Tōjō.
Followed by a cheerful, noisy voice,
“Wow. The view count is just growing now. I guess my efforts for swapping the photos isn’t for naught.”
Staring at the phone and talking was Hiina Oumi of the news club, who was supposedly unconscious and hospitalized.
Standing right behind them was the cute, doll-like girl, Aoi, whose lips were curled together, seemingly putting on a facade. Koremitsu was left dumbfounded.
(Even Aoi’s here! What’s going on here!)
Hikaru remained rooted, his mouth wide open, and he was completely stumped. It was most probable that Koremitsu too was showing a similar look himself.
Kazuaki got on his feet, his face contorted as he yelled from the top of his lungs.
“What!? Why are you here!? I never recalled having invited you here!! Also, how did you get in? Did Asai threaten the manager and forced him to open the door? Why are they listening to Asai and not to me? None of them are of any use. I shall fire them, fire them all!”
To put it bluntly, the dazzling look and swaying hair truly was like that of a woman.
Asai gave Kazuaki a condescending look while the latter was in that state.
“The manager did not obey my words. He obeyed the will of the Mikados’ head and unlocked the door.”
“I do not know what you mean~”
Kazuaki glared at Asai spitefully.
(The head, as in Kazuaki and Hikaru’s dad? I remember he’s still lying sick out there…”
“No matter how poor his condition is, as the head of the Mikados, he has to fulfill his duty when the eldest son is to be doing such a thing, no?”
“Father!? He saw it!?”
“Yes.”
Asai coldly nodded.

Kazuaki glare so angrily, his blood vessels were about to burst, his face contorted to a point of speechless.
“Why~! Why, why did you do such a thing!? This is overboard! Too much! That is too cruel of you, Asai! Hey, Third Princess! Asai is being too overboard! Like a demon! Wh-what did I do to offend Asai!? Yo-you are are the devil!”
Kazuaki vented his complaints as he held the chameleon cage, and Asai raised her eyebrows.
“—**To avoid the judgement of Koremitsu Akagi, put a wet handkerchief in ‘The Aoi flower’ table’** You were the one who sent such a weird message, did you? After I ignored it, I had a wet handkerchief placed at my table that day, and after that, there was a dead cicada put in it, followed by pin holders, and then, the requests got increasingly worse. Whenever I received a
message, I would have the same items mentioned in the messages onto my table.

—I know that you are the one who placed the chopper from the home economics room in my drawer, Aoi.

—I do not know about that. Did you not put a pin holder from the floral arrangement club in my shoe locker, Asa?

Koremitsu recalled the intense squabble Asai and Aoi had on the school corridor that day.
Back then, he was startled to hear things like chopper and pi n holders. Following that were the messages—

—I never did send any message. Did you not send a few weird ones yourself?

—How can I possibly be sending any to you when we are on harsh terms!

“I do not know! Your personality is so gloomy and cruel, Asai, that you are hating people like a demon. Was it not a certain person in school who did this?”
“Well yes, but someone was **ordered by you to do so**, I suppose?”
Kazuaki was left speechless.
Any attempts to retort or defend himself were overturned.
“You tried to make me suspect Aoi, but your intentions were completely wrong. The reason why we had that argument so openly was to make you careless.”
Asai straightened her back, giving a sharp glint in her eyes; once she was done speaking, Aoi nervously spoke,
“I too received a message telling me to put dress pins and chopper in the

‘Morning Glory table’, and I had the same items put at my table. It seemed Asa was the one who did it—but.”
Aoi’s eyes showed a determined glint.
“No matter how much Asa hates me, she definitely is not the kind of person to do such a thing. I know this very well, having grown up with her since young.”
Asai restrained all her emotions, pretending to be stoic as she listened to Aoi.
And then, she calmly stated,
“…I have no reason to suspect Aoi. You chose the wrong targets this time, Kazuaki.”
After hearing Asai’s words, Aoi’s cheeks were slightly blushed, looking delighted and proud.
Hikaru’s expression too tendered as he stared at them. He had been worried that Aoi and Asai were unable to reconcile their differences since Summer began; surely he must be really happy to know that the bond between them did not vanish.
Kazuaki’s face in turn got increasingly contorted, and he hugged the chameleon cage tightly,
“I-I do not know anything…I do not know anything at all~~! Hey, that is right~, yes~, Third Princess~?”
He pressed his forehead onto the chameleon cage as he said that.
The chameleon merely swiped its tongue, unable to provide any defense for Kazuaki.
Kazuaki remained pale and silent, perhaps rattled that his beloved pet was treating him so coldly.
Koremitsu in turn had no intention of showing sympathy.
Hiina too gave a tomboyish smile, saying nonchalantly,
“I too pretended to be knocked out and hospitalized. It really is great that I was able to go all out hiding in the darkness.”
And just like Aoi and Asai’s quarrel, what appeared to be Hiina carted into an ambulance and taken to the hospital was all a sham.
(Really, these guys—)
If only they had given a heads-up. While feeling enlightened, Koremitsu was a little miffed.
How much do you think I worried because of you guys?
However, it may seem that Asai and the others toiled on, endured skepticism and distrust, and fought on with indomitable wills in places Koremitsu could not see.
Tōjō, who was all flustered when Asai and Aoi were arguing, had reverted to his usual self at this point, speaking with a solemn tone,
“Even with the Mikados’ influence to censor this incident, and even if you do get escape the legal punishment, the facts that were greatly publicized will never be removed. Those people nominating you as the next head of the Mikados will be thinking about it again. This too includes my father”

There was a war between the Roses and the Wisterias over the next head of the Mikados.
The Roses were led by Kazuaki's mother, and the Wisterias were led by Hikaru's stepmother, Fujino.
Tōjō declared the defeat of the Roses.
Kazuaki stuck his face on the chameleon cage, slightly shivering.
Asai then dealt the final blow.
"Your mother must be feeling enraged now. She may be thinking that this son of hers is useless, and will abandon you. I suppose you should hurry and find a way to appease her."
Kazuaki had his back turned on Koremitsu and the others this entire time, suddenly shivered violently,
"…No…I do not know. I do not know anything~. Not the messages, not the drugs."
The stammering words got increasingly louder, and became spiteful words.
"I just brought Yū back for a little while. I just wanted to show the red dog who shamed me who the boss is here. No! I hate this!! I should have realized it back then! I feel filthy talking to all the women related to Hikaru!!"
Kazuaki immediately turned around.
The black hair fell, and his eyes were utterly vengeful as he glared at Yū, who was shriveled behind Koremitsu. He opened his red lips, yelling with all his might,
"Of course! Stop pretending to be pure! You definitely slept with Hikaru in that tattered apartment and enjoyed yourself there! You are undoubtedly a bitch!"
In any case, he decided to counter the combined assault from Asai's group, and aimed for the weakest amongst them,Yū.
(This guy's rotten to the core!)
Hikaru's face cringed, and Koremitsu charged forward with a clenched fist.
Tōjō too approached Kazuaki with a grim face simultaneously.
But at this moment, some long, soft, frilly hair gently passed by Koremitsu from the side.
(Eh?)
And it suddenly stopped.
At that instance, Yū got right in front of Kazuaki, and delivered a resounding slap at Kazuaki's right cheek.
(!)
Koremitsu could not believe it.
She slapped him!
Yū actually slapped him!
Hikaru, floating around, watched on with his mouth agape. Asai, Aoi and Hiina too looked astonished.
Tōjō in turn widened his eyes, looking dazed, his hands cupped over his head as he knelt down on the floor.

He had assumed that Yū was a feeble, honest girl, had a crush on her. *What exactly caused her to actually slap someone else,* , perhaps he was completely shocked.
“This has to be a nightmare…” Kazuaki stammered.
Kazuaki too must have predicted that he would be beaten up by Koremitsu and the others, but never in his wildest dreams would he have expected Yū to return a slap in kind to him.
He was left at a loss.
Yū stared at Kazuaki’s face, and whispered,

“That was for…slandering Hikaru and me without any basis.”

Kazuaki collapsed onto the floor.
“Unbelievable…that is why…”
His lips let out a vague voice.
And then,
“THAT’S WHY I HATE WOMEEENNN!!!!”
He bawled.
“Women…what about women!! They are weak, foolish, filthy, inferior species. They just need to lower their heads and obey, yet they just use their looks to attract others, feebly rely on others, and say ‘I cannot live on without you. You have to protect me’. But they in fact are stubborn, foolhardy beings, I cannot kill them all no matter how many I tried to. Others got fooled by their delicate, sheltered selves, yet they just go about frolicking with the flowers through **their own faces**!!!”
Large beads of tears melted his mascara, eyeshadow and formation, and he was a terrible wreck.
If Kazuaki was to have a mirror in front of him at this point, surely he would have committed suicide at that instance.
(Anyway, you aren’t a **girl**.)
Perhaps Koremitsu was not alone in this thinking, maybe everyone else had the same thought, but nobody retorted.
It was likely that nobody was in the mood to retort due to how awkward they felt as they saw Kazuaki weep like a bawling child.
“Ugh, but why does Hikaru like women!!! I am much cuter than they are!! I have such nice, white skin, and I am prettier than them. Why…why is he so gentle towards girls! I-I…was never in his sights! The women around Hikaru are all sluts, they lost their virginity! Compared to such filthy brown hair swine, ugh, what am I lacking in!! How can I possibly lose!?”
At first, Koremitsu did not understand what Kazuaki was saying.
At one moment, Kazuaki mentioned Koremitsu’s name; at another, he said he was cuter. Was there a link?
Asai raised her eyebrows, and Aoi widened her eyes.
Tōjō continued to cup his head with his heads, and Hiina gave a solemn, tragic look at the weeping Kazuaki.

“…”
Yū too watched Kazuaki sadly,
And Hikaru—
Watched Kazuaki with the exact same expression Yū did.
“M-mother—said that Hikaru was a child born of that wretched woman, so she forbade me from speaking to him…to ignore him…I-I could not look at him at all…if our eyes were to meet, I was to look away…but, I was the one, ignored by Hikaru.”
The mascara caused the tears to be dyed black, trickling down the chin, and black beads formed on the skirt.
The son of the wife, and the son of the mistress.
The son who was raised to be the successor, and the son who was not supposed to be born onto this world, slandered by others.
Kazuaki was assumed to be more outstanding than Hikaru in every aspect, that he should be the leading man.
But in fact, it was Hikaru, who should be hiding in a dark corner, overwhelming everyone with that dazzling, brilliant light of an adorable smile of his.

—You have to keep smiling at all times. Everyone will love you because of this.

Hikaru’s mother, who passed away when he was young, kept repeating these words, that even if he was teased, he was to continue smiling with sincerity.
Koremitsu knew that Hikaru abided by this promise, and kept showering the people around him with his love, always maintaining his smile, and grew into a boy who was yet to cry.
He too knew that Hikaru was always alone.
But to Kazuaki, Hikaru was probably better than his wretched self, for the latter was always smiling brilliantly.
That was why Koremitsu felt that Kazuaki was jealous of Hikaru, hated him, and wanted to rob him of his true love.
But there was something amiss.
While there was such a feeling, that did not seem to be all—
(Is this guy also one of Hikaru’s?)
Kazuaki sniveled.
“Sobs…I wore Tsuyako’s red one piece dress, and approached Hikaru…he smiled and held my hand…we even had a promise saying that we will play together next time…after I put on male clothing, even when I did approach him…staring at him intently, he would just smile at other girls— and would not look at me!!!”
(As I thought, it’s about Hikaru—)
Hikaru watched the many black trails that glided down the cheeks of his wailing older brother.

One had to wonder what Hikaru was feeling when he heard this sudden confession from this older brother he was estranged from.
The clear eyes were dyed with a little haze.
“H-he would not look at me because I am a boy…did he? Would he come back to speak to me, if I keep wearing that red dress and continue to crossdress? Will he continue to play with me? Will he look at the Tulips in the garden with me? Hey! Hikaru! Tell me! Hikaru!!”
Hikaru watched on in anguish as Kazuaki continued to call his name over and over again.
Asai, Aoi, Tōjō, Hiina respectively scowled, watch on tearily, give a conflicted look, and remained silent.
Koremitsu whispered,
“…Kazuaki, do you like Hikaru?”
Perhaps he was not jealous at Hikaru, but at the flowers Hikaru loved?
His hair ruffled as he glared at Koremitsu, Kazuaki’s face, now looking like a bawling child, was devoid of any presence.
However, he continued to put up a facade.
“I-I do hate him, of course!! Hikaru kept ignoring me, always fooling around with those frivolous non-virgins, and even had a scandal with that Tsuyako who is so much uglier than I am! I really hate him!!!”
His voice echoed through the entire room.
Like Hikaru, Yū too looked on with sadness, and whispered,
“Mr. Kazuaki…you told me before that he wanted to talk to Hikaru. That was…his…true intentions? Also…when I mentioned that Mr. Akagi has fulfilled my promise with Hikaru, you told me with sadness that ‘to me, that is impossible’…”
Kazuaki lowered his eyebrows, his lips curled into a frown, his face looking utterly hapless, before he eked out those words.
“Fuu…that was…that was just a lie to bluff you…I really despise Hikaru. Th-that is why…I removed all the Tulips Hikaru grew from the root. But even so, Hikaru never realized that I did it…everyone thought it was Tsuyako’s fault…Hikaru then grew new flowers the next day, and went off to play with Aoi and Asai…”
Aoi and Asai widened their eyes.
When Hikaru and the others were younger, that was the incident about Tsuyako ripping out the Tulips grown at Aoi’s house.
That was Kazuaki’s doing while he was dressed in Tsuyako’s clothes.
Was that not because Tsuyako was furious at Aoi for being betrothed to Hikaru, when she had hoped to betrothed to Hikaru herself rather than with Kazuaki?
When confronted with Kazuaki’s eccentric thoughts, Koremitsu was left flabbergasted, and at the same time, he felt rage surging from the bottom of his belly.
That incident caused a tremendous psychological trauma to Aoi, and also to Tsuyako.

How could be continue to say such selfish things and cause trouble for others!? Such a callous person!
“!!—Kazuaki, you became so vengeful because you wanted Hikaru to look at you? Are you an idiot?”
Everyone present turned their eyes to Koremitsu.
Feeling utterly humiliated, Kazuaki stared back,
“I-I do not wish to be called a fool by a brute…”
He groaned with vengeance.
But Koremitsu did not hear Kazuaki’s words to the very hand, as he glared at Kazuaki, quipping,
“The reason why Hikaru never paid attention to you is because you never took the initiative to approach him! Hikaru always wanted friends of the same gender! If you had told him that you wish to be friends with him, he would have gone right at you immediately!”
Koremitsu thought of his own situation with Hikaru.
Hikaru gave his all so that they could be friends.
He waited in the corridor for Koremitsu to pass by, and talked to him “May I borrow your textbook?”.
Without that encounter, they would not have become steadfast friends.
“The thing about being friends is that you have to work hard for it! It’s a must! If you want to make friends, no matter how scared you are, you have to approach! It’s impossible if you don’t talk!”
One has to approach another little by little. By repeating the same thing—both sides would get closer, understand each other, and finally become friends.
That was how Hikaru and Koremitsu became friends.
Hikaru was delighted to hear Koremitsu’s words—weeping as he heard them.
He then slowly approached Kazuaki, speaking with a voice filled with tenderness,
“Brother…even if that girl in the had taken off that red dress and removed that wig, saying that we should go out, I would have nodded. I would also hold your hands and watch the Tulips.”
He spoke with an apprehensive, yet distinctively warm smile.
That was what Kazuaki had always dreamed of.
But even so, Kazuaki, being so obsessed with Hikaru, could not see the latter.
Kazuaki too was the same.
The same as the other girls who lost their light called Hikaru, sealed in the labyrinth of sighs.
Kazuaki continued to snivel.
“E-even if I do work hard now, my wish can no longer be fulfilled…because —Hikaru, he is already.”
Leave it to me. Koremitsu thought of his melancholic friend, and faced his friend, saying this.

Then, he yelled,
“I’ll be your friend in Hikaru’s stead! I’ll stay with you! What you did to Aoi, Tsuyako senpai and Yū was criminal, incorrigible things no human should be doing! I won’t forgive that! But after this, no matter what you do to me, I’m not going to ignore you, and I’m not going to run away! I’ll fight you head on and blow up a ruckus! If you dare make another mistake, I’m going to come over no matter where you are and stop you, yelling not to do it! The world may quietly accept your insolence, but I definitely won’t let it slide!”
Kazuaki, collapsed on the floor, looked up at Koremitsu in surprise.
“W-w-what are…you saying…?”
It seemed he was extremely bewildered, not knowing what to say.
Kazuaki was not the only one feeling that way; Asai and the others too were left dumbfounded.
Koremitsu reached out his hand.
First off, they started with an initial greeting.
“Be friends with me! If you want to see Tulips, I’ll go with you!”
Kazuaki’s teardrops, mixed with mascara, fell from the sullied eyes, his lips quivering. He wanted to spite, but could not eke out a voice.
Koremitsu grabbed Kazuaki’s right hand firmly, and pulled him up.
Kazuaki did not resist.
He held onto Koremitsu’s hand, and never let go, sobbing as the black hair covered his face like a curtain.
♢
♢ ♢
Hey, Koremitsu.
Perhaps I been purposely limited myself in this little world till this point.
I did boast about, saying that I hope to make friends, but in fact, I was never able to do anything.
When I was shunned by the other boys and bullied by them, perhaps I should have taken the initiative to approach them instead.
I did not know when it started, but deep inside, I gave up on greeting them.
Koremitsu, until I met you.
I really wanted to get closer to you no matter what; I called for you, wanting you to turn back.
Ever since that moment, my world expanded.
Also, during the days I was with you, I experienced all kinds of things I had never experienced before realizing things I had been oblivious to.
I boasted, saying that I knew everything about girls; perhaps that is not the case.
Girls are certainly not people who are so feeble they need to be taken care of.
They dedicate themselves, able to proudly do the most foolish things for the ones they love.
Yes, flowers are not simply frail.
They are strong, and tender.

Humans love flowers, but flowers love humans too.

What do you think, Koremitsu?
You saw Yū's determination.
You saw Miss Shikibu's dedication.

Right now, the flower blooms within your heart—
Only you know the name of that flower.

But before you allow me to hear what it is from you, I too have something I wish to end.
No matter the outcome, I will not run away.
I want to share the history of my love, and my experiences when I was alive.
I wish to meet that Wisteria, understand the heart I had yet to.
So this is my final wish.
Can you accompany me?
Are you willing to witness everything until the very end?

While I am on this Earth—

Epilogue

The following day, during the morning of the rest day.
Kazuaki brought a cage with the chameleon in it, and arrived at Koremitsu's house.
"This is what I feel. I do wish to marry this child I took utmost care of as your wife, Mr Akagi."
The sparkling, expectant expression appeared as he said so bashfully. This sudden, drastic change in attitude was really a little terrifying, but Kazuaki forced the cage into Koremitsu's hands.
"The name is Third Princess, you.know~it likes live crickets as food. It does not really show much of its feelings, but do take care of it well."
One had to wonder if the chameleon in the transparent cage had feelings or not, let alone whether it could express its feelings. In the end, it spat its tongue out.
"H-hey, marry—I don't have an interest in marrying reptiles…"
"You cannot accept my feelings? You are the one who asked to be friends after all."
Kazuaki suddenly gave a despondent look as he brought his face over worriedly. At the same time, he shoved the cage onto Koremitsu.
"Well, not really. To suddenly hand me a chameleon here is…"
"But did you not adopt Yū's cat here? If you can take in a cat, you can take in Third Princess, no?"
"I didn't take Lapis in as a wife. And she's with Tôjô now, not with me."
"Well, cats are such frivolous beings after all. Third Princess is still a virgin in the palm of my hand now. Surely she will not veer away."
"Virgin—ack, a female!? I can't tell at all. Whatever, take it back."

“Why must you refuse Third Princess? You do hate me after all, no? You were lying when you said you wanted to see the Tulips with me, right?”
“I say, that’s something completely different—”
(ARRRGGGGHHHH, this really annoying! Any ordinary guy would have refused it alright. Now he wants me to take over the chameleon?)
3 mere minutes of negotiations with Kazuaki was enough of a hassle for Koremitsu.
The previous night, he left Kazuaki, left a sobbing wreck, obedient, face covered in tears at the apartment, and returned home.
Asai remained silent the entire time, but when they left, she spoke with an icy tone,
“You really are a fool. You will definitely regret being Kazuaki’s friend.”
Aoi too sounded conflicted,
“Mr Akagi…I hope you do not get imprisoned by Mr Kazuaki, or be poisoned by him. Please be on your guard.”
She said worriedly. Tôjô too frowned.
“Be careful when making friends.”
He gave this solemn advice. Hiina herself looked delighted, chiming in,
“Do remember to inform me when you go see the Tulips. I’ll get you a photo to commemorate.”
Koremitsu broke away from Asai and the rest on the way back, and ended up being alone with Yū,
“Mr Kazuaki…is someone different…from what I thought…but I was, really lonely…when I didn’t have anyone around me to rely on…”
She whispered,
“Thus, I feel…it’s great that you’re willing to be his friend, Mr Akagi.”
“Yū, you don’t hate Kazuaki at all?”
Once Koremitsu asked this, Yū answered with her clear eyes.
“I suppose so. I guess…it really was a shock to me, but it was thanks to him that…I was able to meet you again, Mr Akagi.”
The fleeting smile appeared on the white, speckless face, and Koremitsu’s heart was gripped.
Yū showe a smile, but perhaps she was rather despondent.
“Erm, Mr Akagi, that promise about the date…is it still valid?”
“…Yeah.”
After some hesitation, he answered, and then,
“I got a few things I want to ask you about, Yū.”
He gave her a serious look, and she gave a faint smile,
“I understand”
At that moment, Hikaru was at a place Koremitsu could not see, watching over the latter.
They sent Yū back to the hospital, and walked down the frrgid street in the middle of the night that was otherwise devoid of human presence.

—My final wish.

Koremitsu's heart ached increasingly once Hikaru said that.
Surely, soon after, many things would come to an end.

"Hey, Mr Akagi, what is the matter~? You are lying to me after all, are you~?
How cruel! How cruel of you~"
Koremitsu was harassed on the corridor as Kazuaki spoke with the same voice Hikaru had. The tranquil atmosphere that occurred the prior day was dissipated completely.
Hikaru chuckled in the air,
"Do accept it, Koremitsu. A chameleon will become cute once it starts feeding. Shiiko will have another new friend."
And rambled irresponsibly.
(Who do you think is the one going to catch live crickets here!?)
But if Kazuaki was to continue harassing him, Masakaze would end up suspecting their relationship here. Any bystander hearing this would misunderstand that Koremitsu fooled another man.
(Good thing Shiiko isn't at home.)
He sighed,
"Got it. This bride—well, leaving that aside, I'll take her in. You fine with that?"
Once Koremitsu said that reluctantly, Kazuaki immediately sparkled,
"Yes! You are the best after all! So different from the rest!"
Koremitsu found Hikaru to be annoying at first when he was haunted, and the older brother too was rather annoying himself. *You guys have the same blood after all* Koremitsu stare at the cage grumpily, and Kazuaki again leaned forward.
"Ah, yes! Allow me to say this first. I did not write any one of those messages Asai and the rest talked about. The pranks done on Yū was by the receptionist her. I did affirm it myself, but the slut aiming to be my lover just went crazy because she was jealous of Yū. About the fire underground, all I did was to light the incense there, and it was not supposed to be that big…I did not intend to send Honoka Shikibu information about Yū that often. She was being active around her, so I thought I could use her, but I did not rile her intentionally. It is tragic if everything is blamed on me."
"Hey, wait!"
Koremitsu stopped Kazuaki's motor spiel, and asked with a sharp glare,
"Are you sure you didn't send those messages?"
Kazuaki pouted his lips,
"Hm, that receptionist slut said she was ordered by my representative, that it was for my sake, crying when she said that. That really angered me."
Koremitsu and Hikaru exchanged looks, and Hikaru's face ffroze.
(Wait, Another Poppy!?)

Kazuaki was the one who sold the illegal drugs, but there was another mastermind who sent the messages and spread the seeds of discord amongst Koremitsu's group.
Feeling cold sweat trickling down his back, Koremitsu continued to ask, "You mean, till this point, not just this point? You never did send any messages slandering all the women related to Hikaru?"
"I say, I do not know anything. I will not like to a friend."
Suddenly, the cellphone in Koremitsu's pocket vibrated.
Koremitsu placed the cage in the corridor, checked the sender, and found it to be another anonymous message.
Once the message was shown on the screen, Koremitsu gasped.
◇
◇ ◇
(Akagi said that he likes me…)
Honoka got up from the hospital bed, spacing out.
Her body showed no anomalies, and she should be discharged on this day.
But it seemed her mind was unable to function properly.
In the basement, she heard Koremitsu shout "I like you, Honoka Shikibu!" when embraced in his arms, and kept repeating the words in her mind.
Honoka Shikibu is not an ordinary classmate to me!!! She's a woman I like!!!! Koremitsu exclaimed that with a serious look, and she felt that she could have dropped dead there without a single regret.
(It's Akagi, s-so, he doesn't like me as a lover, but as a friend, in a platonic manner, maybe…but even so, I'm happy.)
She could not be too hopeful about it.
But she wanted to drown in the happiness, the sensation of Koremitsu's arm embracing her, the angry growl of a manly voice, while the image lingered in her mind.
Just when Honoka wanted to repeat the same sight in her mind again.
The ward door was opened, and a dreamy girl with long, faint wavy hair appeared.
"…Miss Kanai."
While Honoka remained shocked, Koremitsu's lover Yū Kanai appeared to be thinking of something, and she whispered,
"Miss Shikibu, I wish to talk to you…about Mr Akagi."
◇
◇ ◇
"What is it, Mr Akagi?"
While Koremitsu stared at the phone with a grim face, Hikaru paled as he watched from the side, shivering incessantly.
The words appearing on the little screen were what Hikaru wanted to hide with all his might; those were the perilous words that ruined everything.

"The child in Fujino Mikado's belly is Lord Hikaru's."
◇

◇ ◇
At a nearby park, Shioriko glared furiously.
“I never thought I would be called out by you, Shiiko. You really shocked me.”
“You’re the one who sent me messages saying that big brother Koremitsu lied to me, that he’s dealing with Kuze, right?”
The other party played dumb, widening her eyes.
“Eh, what’s with that?”
“When we met at the school, you told me ‘Mr Kuze may have caused you trouble, but do your best’. Even Miss Shikibu does not know about Kuze’s name. You knew that big brother Koremitsu didn’t go to school at that moment, and you sent the message to me, saying ‘Koremitsu Akagi went to meet Kuze’. You made me come to school to confirm, and doubt him.”
Once Shioriko said this, the other party narrowed her widened eyes, beaming,
“You’re an elementary school girl, Shiiko. You’re so smart though.”
“Why did you do that? What’s your aim?”
Shioriko wanted to discuss this with Koremitsu, but it seemed the latter was involved in something troublesome, so she did not want him to worry.
And also, the topic Shioriko was most sensitive about was that Kuze was her real father, so she missed the chance to talk.
“Don’t laugh, and tell me.”
The moment Shioriko’s tone became acrid, the other party pulled out a little canister, and sprayed it in front of her.
Shioriko wanted to hold her breath, but was unable to do. Her consciousness began to fade, and she slowly collapsed onto the floor.
Within her blurred vision was the girl acting as Koremitsu’s class representative, giving a demonic, alluring smile, saying,
“My other name is Rokujō.”
Footnote
The crimson flowers gently swayed.
The spider spirit hidden in that flower lingers in my body, granting me power.

It’s name is ‘Rokujō’.

Hey, Hikaru.
On that stormy night, I may have ended your life.
But I regretted it.
So, I buried those wretched women who stained you, and brought a new sacrifice over, towards the place where our hearts passed, the place where it all began, and ended.

So that you shall be reborn in this world again.

Side Story

At the ancestral home of Kazuaki's mother, the Udates, there was a shrine dedicated to worshiping Rokujō, the woman who transformed into a spider and devoured her husband and the mistress.

The Udates were terrified of this blood flowing in their body, and were ashamed about it, never revealing it.

Kazuaki too learned of this from the servants in the next door while the latter were whispering to each other.

—The madam herself is a descendant of the spider..

They mentioned that the definite reason why his mother treated his father and the mistress so cruelly was because of the spider blood.

They even said that in the past, a woman called Lady Rokujō was married into the family, and that she transformed into the spider during to envy, devouring her husband and that mistress.

Kazuaki also knew about that shrine.

When he accompanied his mother to the Udate residence, he noticed an ancient shrine behind the greenery, one that was deliberately hidden. He also recalled the crimson flowers swaying in front of the shrine, looking so alluring.

(There is that Rokujō person sealed inside that shrine, if I remember correct?) Having thought that, Kazuaki was utterly terrified, and even froze there.

How wonderful it is to devour and murder those wretched women! I too wish to be like this Rokujō person, to rid all the wretched, filthy, unreasonable women in this world.

While admiring the existence of women, Kazuaki himself wished to be a woman, and also wanted to eliminate all that he despised—he was trapped in such conflicting emotions within him.

Yes, he wanted to be a beautiful, powerful woman like Rokujō, and punish the flirtatuous, puny women.

Wearing the clothing of one of his Udate relatives, Tsuyako, whom he was betrothed to, Kazuaki snuck outside.

He often visited the Rokujō shrine, and would be utterly mesmerized by the crimson flowers swaying in front of the shrine, his cheeks practically sticking towards them; *I bullied that girl today in this manner, that girl too suffered such a punishment*, he reported.

There was a gathering at the Udates on that day, and Kazuaki removed the red one-piece skirt from Tsuyako's body, wore it, and put on a black wig. The black wig belonged to his mother, so it looked a little too big for his head, the long hair covering his eyes, swaying with the wind. While enjoying the fluttering sensation of the one-piece skirt, he went to the corner of the garden, where the shrine was.
Over there, he found a frail little girl with large glasses staring at the swaying crimson flowers…

"I heard that those flowers are so red because they suck blood."

Kazuaki went to speak to the girl, and the latter cringed her neck in fear, before turning around.
And once the latter spotted him, she cringed in shock, the eyes behind the glasses filled with fear as she remained rooted.
Kazuaki was intrigued by this timid girl, narrowed his eyes, and continued,
He said that the shrine was decided to a terrifying and powerful woman called Rokujō, who transformed into a spider and devoured her husband and the mistress.
He even mentioned that Rokujō used the power of the spider to mutilate all the filthy women.
The petite, bespectacled girl shivered increasingly, her face paled as she listened to Kazuaki.
And so, while trembling,
"Why did Rokujō eat her husband?"
She asked.
"To be one with him forever, to obtain that eternal love."
Kazuaki once read from a book the meaning of the word 'eternal'.
It meant something that could continue to live on, even after the ethereal body was lost.
Something that glittered in the sky.
"Only a special woman like Rokujō can obtain eternal love."
The girl widened her eyes, shivering as she watched Kazuaki, and continued to ask timidly,
"How…do you know about this?"
The crimson flowers swayed with the breeze, and the black hair swayed by Kazuaki in an alluring manner.
At this moment, he felt a powerful force rising within his body. Raising his lips that were covered in red lipsticks, he smiled, and answered,

"Because I am Rokujō."

The reaction of that girl thereafter really delighted him.

She was fidgeting like a turkey, and shrieked. Her eyes could not be any wider, and her face contorted as she ran away in fear.
She tripped over while on the way back, staggered to her feet, and continued to run.
(Ahh, girls really are fools after all. Whose daughter is that anyway? Whatever, I probably will not remember an ugly frail, unimpressive troll like her the next time we meet.)
He giggled as he watched her leave.
♢
♢ ♢
“Why am I dreaming of my younger days?”
The following morning.
Kazuaki was dressed in his loose pajamas, his hair ruffled and unkempt, and he began to speak to the caged chameleon placed on the table beside the bed.
“That plain girl broke the legs of her glasses when she turned back to run, and they got stuck to her face. She ran away with all her might, looking so foolish and dimwitted too. Well, Rokujō is a powerful existence after all; it is no wonder that girl got terrified. Little Tsuyako was shocked when I put on girls clothing and became Rokujō herself, staring at me so intently. I say, Third Princess, ‘Rokujō’ is really such an indomitable, absolute presence. I can be forgiven for whatever I do.”
The chameleon Third Princess maintained a stoic facade as it spat its tongue out. She was being so adorable so early in the morning, covered in an alluring jade color. It feasted on the cicadas it liked, catching them effortlessly and devouring them.
Upon seeing that, Kazuaki continued to muttered,
“But for some reason…that man was not terrified of ‘Rokujō’. He wanted to be friends with me…”
Rage gradually rose up his forehead, and he pressed it onto the cage.

—I’ll be your friend in Hikaru’s stead.

That gruff voice was akin to a mongrel’s howl, his eyes filled with vigor. Such a scene appeared in Kazuaki’s ears and mind, and his body was seething red.
“What a farce that was. That mongrel wants me to be friends with such such a lowly creature. Such a stooge who does not know his place.”
With regards to Koremitsu Akagi, the one who paraded himself to be Hikaru’s representative, Kazuaki never took heed of him before this. Kazuaki’s face was wrecked because of the incident involving Aoi, and he had a nosebleed. Thereafter, Kazuaki despised him, plotting his vengeance, and for that end, he brought Yū, whom Koremitsu still had feelings for, back to Japan, intending to frame here.

Thanks to Asai and Tojō's interference however, due to some messages, pin holders, gym clothing and so on, the issues Kazuaki paid no heed to came to haunt him, and photos of the evidence and him cross-dressing were uploaded onto the internet. The previous day was the worst day in his life. At this moment, the Mikados were surely doing their best to delete such photos off the internet. They would also involve the best lawyers possible to deal with the drug issues, so a leniency in judgement would be possible, let alone acquittance.
The vacancy of the Mikados head has nothing to do with Kazuaki at this point. The latter did not wish to take up that position in the first place, and his mother did say that he did not need to be **obsessed with standing at the top of the Mikados.** What that woman truly desired was something completely different, and Kazuaki was at most a pawn to fulfill her wish. Perhaps she would be utterly furious that Kazuaki was unable to be of use to her.
Upon imagining his mother being so furious, her teeth gnashed, Kazuaki found it to be laughable, not fazed by the slightest.
(I do feel a lot more relieved that I do not have to take up the troublesome role of being the head of the family.)
He really did have to thank Asai and the rest for being so relieved. However, he could not accept Koremitsu's request as it was…when Koremitsu grabbed his hand, the reason why Kazuaki never shook it off was because the grip was too firm, and his hand was numb from it…he really disliked those callous, crude brutes that only rely on their physicality and arm strength, and surely he was not something to be easily convinced like that.

—If you dare make another mistake, I'm going to come over no matter where you are and stop you, yelling not to do it.

—The world may quietly accept your insolence, but I definitely won't let it slide!

"…He actually said such disrespectful words to me, the one who will be forgiven for whatever he does…it really is unbelievable. I forgot to grumble about it because I was shocked. Looks like the cells of idiocy has infected. Oh deary me, why is my heart fluttering like this? My face is really burning wildly."
Looking flustered, he placed his forehead on the cage.
And soon after, bashfulness filled his eyes, and he whispered his frustrations,
"Hey, Third Princess…if I am to be in female clothing when we go see the Tulips, will **Mr Akagi** hold my hand…?"

Author's Notes

Hello everyone, this is Mizuki Nomura. The 9th volume of 'When Hikaru Was On the Earth… is about 'Rokujō". The cover this time follows up on 'Suetsumuhana', a mysterious person! Well, everyone finally got a chance to see that it's really an alluring, wonderful person. Miss Takeoka's blue artwork is really pretty, but to me, her red artwork brings an impact that differs from blue, and I really like it too! Ah! Speaking of which, Miss Takeoka's yellow artwork does give a warm, fuzzy feeling. I suppose I do like all of the color works Miss Takeoka does. (laughs).

This story has finally developed till this point, and all that is left is the final volume. I did mention in the 1st volume that this story is derived from 'Genji Monogatari' and one other story. Having read the final volume, surely you will be able to realize what that title is.

On a slight change of topic, I did mention to everyone in the 4th volume of 'Dress' that the final volume of Mr Rito Kousaka's 'Book Girl' manga adaptation will be sold in November. It includes a final chapter created by him, and I would say it is a suitable creation to end off the 'Book Girl' series. I really do thank Mr Kousaka for his care, that he was able to summarize the lines in the original work under his pen. It is beautiful, and I really thank him from the bottom of my heart. The interesting dialogue between Tohko and Konoha really did amuse me. This really is a heartwarming yet painful final chapter for me, and I do wish everyone do read it.

Having read this final chapter, the 'Book Girl' series has finally come to an end, and I'm really gracious about it. 'This series is a fortuitous work where all sorts of things happened, and all that were involved in the work really liked it; everyone put in their love into this work, making it a great work. The original final chapter of 'Book Girl' had Konoha say that he'll keep 'Book Girl' contained in the world of novels, but that is just his own thoughts, and has nothing to do with me. Also, I do find an unexpectedly high number of people who equate the thoughts of the characters with that of the author's, and sometimes, I'm left at a loss. Wh-why is this happening? I don't have any complicated love affair, and I didn't have any intense hunger for my parents love. My student life has been peaceful, and when I am frustrated, it is mostly about forget about the PE lessons already or something like that.

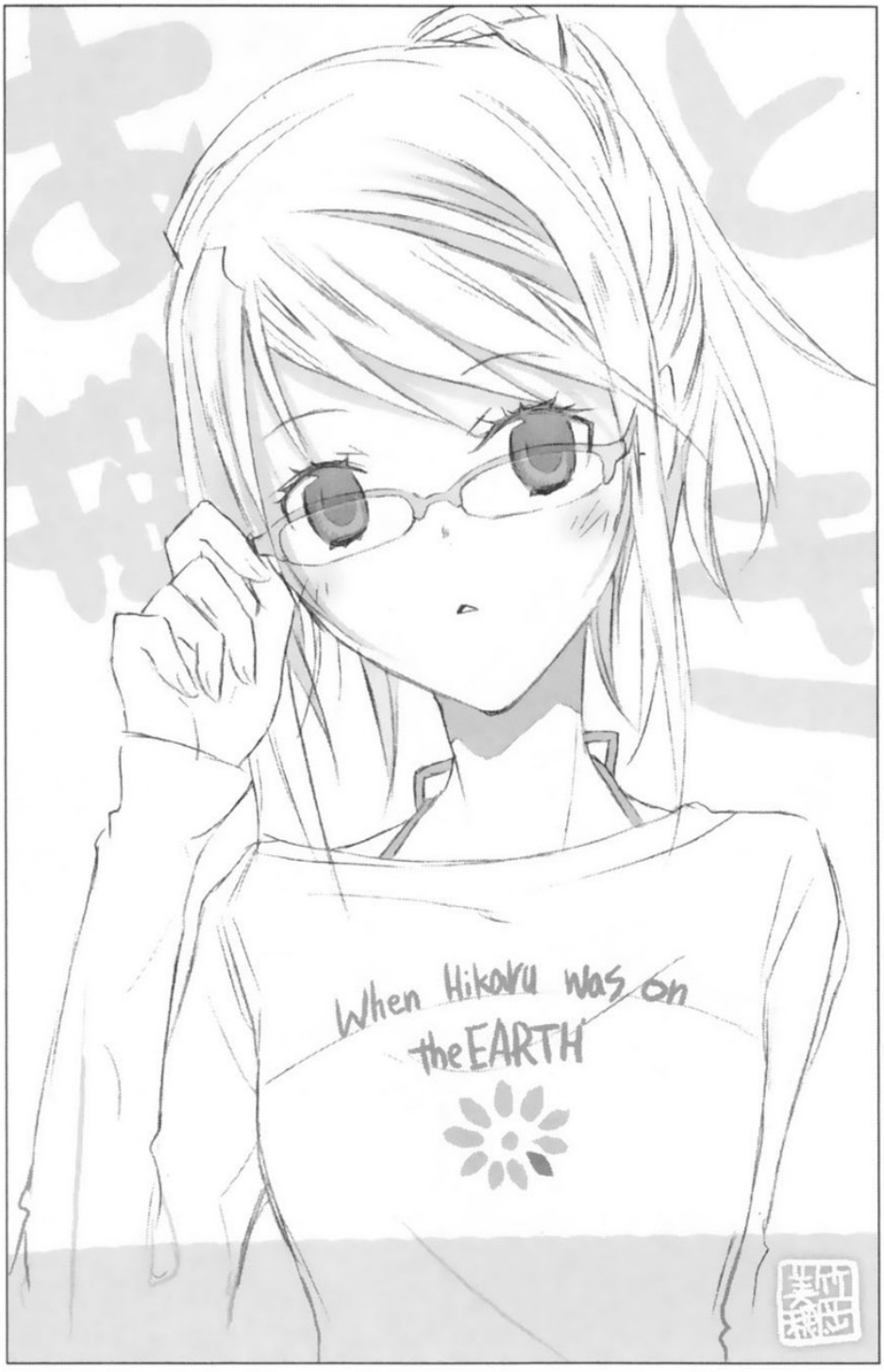
(Because of that, my college life was basically heaven for me since there are no actual sports classes there.)

As a result, this is why I am happily sharing the media mix of my work. Now the only thing I am anxiously looking forward to is a live-action movie adaptation. If the actress acting as Tohko is my favorite, I will have to see it!

The 'Hikaru' series is left at the last volume, but I have to announce a new series once it ends! The illustrator, of course, is Miss Takeoka. Atmosphere-wise, it does feel something similar to both 'Book Girl' and Hikaru', healing-type series, and the themes involved are 'vampires' and 'club activities'. It is

a club that most schools will have, so please imagine what kind of club it is until the volume is to be sold.
The new work has about X volumes worth of manuscripts. I was able to prepare this much beforehand, so I still have some time to prepare for it. I can continue to write a volume and some side stories. They will be sold once the new series is sold.
The 5th volume of ‘Dress’ and the final volume of ‘Hikaru’ will be sold next Spring. It will be a long series of publications thereafter, and I will be delighted if you can buy them.
I look forward to meeting you again in the 5th volume of Dress’.
Year 2013, November 11th
Mizuki Nomura.

Haruno Nishino, 1998, ‘New Japanese Classic Literature series 57. 100 Noh Songs’, Iwanami Bookstore Corporation.


When Hikaru was on
the EARTH

Document Outline

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